

# PIONEERS WHO WENT BEFORE US

We often refer to the early preachers that labored to restore the ancient faith of Christ as our "pioneer preachers." In days past their names were kept alive primarily by brethren who believed in the ideals of the Restoration Movement. At first the liberal element had little interest in what they said or did. They found their progenitors among denominational scholars and reformers.

In time liberals decided to claim the early leaders of our movement for their own. First the Disciples of Christ laid claim to the heritage. They set about to reinterpret the story of our past and the message first preached to make it compatible with their own diluted version of the faith. Now the change agents in our midst have followed that example and are producing an endless flow of books and articles dedicated to revising our understanding of the early years of our movement. It is important that those who love the church and hope to see her survive without loss of her identity have a correct view of those pioneers in the faith.

- They were men with hearts of gold and feet of clay. They were devout, God-fearing men who manfully struggled to free themselves from the shackles of denominationalism. Their hearts were full of the love of God. They had the highest respect for the Word of God and love the church beyond measure. They labored to remove the tangled cords of error that hindered the correct understanding of the Bible and enmeshed and crippled churches.
- Being human like us, they were imperfect in their knowledge and in some aspects of their practice. They did the best of which they were capable in their day and age and with the tools of knowledge at their disposal. Thus it is possible for a researcher to find among their writings a wide array of mistaken notions and ideas about the faith. By ignoring the great fundamental truths which they generally held in common, one can paint a distorted picture of them and the church of their generation. Like us, they strove to be like Jesus wanted them to be and never reached perfection. Only by God's grace can they or we hope to stand before him justified.
- They are our examples, but not our authority. Like them the church of the
- 21st century must always look to Christ to find her authority for faith and practice (Matt. 28:20). The truth is determined by what saith the Scriptures rather than by what saith the pioneers such as Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone.
- We should admire the pioneers but not idolize them. Having read most of the biographies and histories of our people, I can say that their stories are inspirational, encouraging and faith-building. They were noble champions. They were sacrificial heroes. They were giants among their fellows, but

they were men of clay, just as we are. Some of them crashed along the way. Some recovered other did not.

- They were men of mixed abilities. A few were greatly gifted by God, natural leaders who would have excelled in any field of endeavor. Others were ordinary men who labored in the shadows of their great leaders.
- A few of that early generation of preachers were highly educated, but the majority were men of limited education. They educated themselves while struggling to preach the Word and provide for their families.
- They had few tools with which to work. Our young men can attend Christian Schools, be taught by fellow-Christians, have access to marvelous libraries, computers, The Internet. Most of our pioneers never had such advantages.
- Thousands of books devoted to Bible exposition and research are available to us, but our fathers had only a handful in comparison. We can afford them but most of them could not.
- They were our trailblazers, preparing the way for us, making our paths easier. In their path stood armies of sectarians determined to block them. They fought against entrenched error and won. They did not always have the time or opportunity to build up their converts and the congregations they planted, they were always moving onward.
- We build on the foundation they laid for us (I Cor. 3:10). We enjoy the fruits of their labors.
- If we can see it bit further than they did, it is because we stand on their shoulders.
- We have far superior educational opportunities. Thus a young man can enter his field of labor with a much greater fund of knowledge than he would have in 1820.
- We have more and finer tools with which to work. My library consists of over 20,000 volumes. I recall that Racon John Smith had only 3 or 4 books to his name.
- We can profit from their mistakes. We need not repeat them. Two centuries removed from them, we can see pitfalls and errors that might have seemed harmless at the time. We can see how some of their choices and decisions played it. If heeded we can avoid their painful consequences.
- We are beneficiaries of their victories. The strangle hold of Bible ignorance, denominational error and superstition that encompassed the race of their day, was broken. Our task is thus much easier. Entrenched enemies were beaten and churches were planted. We can move into such a community and begin our work with a thousand advantages.
- We should thank God for those noble pioneers.

- We should imitate their faith (Heb. 13:7).
- We should accept the responsibility to carry the cause they launch on to completion.
- We must never fritter away or surrender the victories they won at so great cost.
- At whatever cost, we must pass the faith of Christ bequeathed to us on to the generation that follows. Like a chain, one broken link means a failure of the whole.
  
- When the history of our generation is written, may our names be worthy of mention with those of our pioneers.

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