

Grit In My Gizzard: No. 5

Religion In Rochester

Our one-room frame church building was beside the high school with a concrete outdoor baptistery behind it. It was about 36' x 50' with the podium protruding from a bay window and "amen seats" on each side facing the platform. A blackboard behind the pulpit was an essential and ever-present fixture. Clear windows allowed for air circulation and for observation of happenings outside by those dulled by long sermons. Even a snuff-dipper might find it a convenient place to sit and spit. Air conditioning was by cardboard fans provided by local businesses, and our floppy paper-back song books also served as fans in a pinch. It could really be hot with people crowded in those short and narrow cane-bottomed chairs bolted together. Early in my memory, both the building and baptistery were moved about a block to the main street. In the first setting, the audience faced west but in the new location we looked to the south. Early impressions are so indelible that, to this day, I visualize us always facing west.

The town of about 500 had a tabernacle which was used for community affairs. Each church had its turn for summer meetings and there were some "union meetings." New straw would be spread on the ground. The main groups were Methodist, Baptist, and Church of Christ with a small group of Presbyterians and a later start-up of Holiness people. Since there were no radios, televisions, or other such distractions, many of the community attended those revival meetings. Some, not wanting to be involved, would sit in their cars or on the fenders. The Holiness group drew spectators who circled their gatherings to watch their erratic behavior when they "got the Holy Ghost," spoke in tongues, shouted, and exhibited great emotional reactions far into the night.

In those early years before Mom's health broke, we attended some services of other groups, not as participants but as observers. As a small boy, I was scared by maneuvers employed by some preachers. They would make an emotional plea calling for all to bow and close their eyes while those who were "unsaved" raised their hands to indicate inclusion in the prayer. God seemed to have had peepers on the choir platform who, after the prayer, made a bee-line to those who had raised their hands. Those "personal workers" with pained countenance turned on the pressure in front of everybody presumably to bring the persons to salvation. I was terribly scared that one of them would come to me. Some were induced to go to the "mourners' bench" for intense emotional prayer. Some "prayed through" but others of less emotional nature presumably fell short of salvation.

In time the churches abandoned the tabernacle and had open-air meeting with temporary benches beside their buildings in the moonlight nights of August when field work of farmers was less intense. There were always good crowds encircled by bystanders. Temporary lighting always drew swirling swarms of flying insects. Being the only time of the year for baptisms, we might have twenty or thirty. Some of our preachers would "lay it on the sects" in bantam rooster confidence calling other churches by name and exposing their doctrinal errors. Christ as our Savior took a back seat to doctrinal issues and the church. Grace was hardly a spoken word, much less an understood and emphasized idea. We were the one, true church which our proof-texts clearly identified.

One night was usually devoted to the supposedly damning sin of instrumental music in worship. We had all the proof-texts, so we continued to grow.

Maybe I have painted the picture a bit dark. We did develop a dogmatic system of doctrine but what group has it all put together correctly? Many people were brought to Christ who served to the best of their understanding. The building was packed with the sincerest of people every Sunday. In 1908 D. S. Ligon baptized 75 persons in Rochester. Many well-known preachers conducted meetings during my early childhood including E. M. Borden, Price Billingsly, R. L. Whiteside, Early Arceneaux (six meetings), T. E. Milholland, W. M. Davis, Roy H. Lanier, J. W. Chism, Cled Wallace, and J. D. Harvey. In the 1930s, J. D. Harvey added 45 persons baptizing 21 one evening. Again, he baptized 18 persons in one night in 1933. He administered my baptism in that meeting. It was my privilege to baptize his granddaughters, Laynne and Lynn Plemons, 35 and 38 years later. As a young teenager, I was particularly impressed with Cled Wallace in his white suit and white shoes, then a popular style. He introduced us to the Gospel Advocate in which he wrote a regular column titled, "Sword Swipes." That title says it all! I enjoyed reading about his heroic confrontations with various propagators of error whom he called by name. Swipes of his sword always left those enemies exposed in defeat and humiliation.

In 1933 when I was about fourteen, the congregation began using "preacher boys" from Abilene Christian College who came on Sundays. The first was Otis Gatewood who served for three school years. He was followed by Leroy Brownlow, Bill Price, Clifton Rogers, Louie Welch, Ben Newhouse, V. T. Smith, Sr, and perhaps others. Some of these only came during the summer. Louie Welch from the cotton-patch town of Slaton near Lubbock was one of these. He later served five terms as mayor of Houston and is still a friend encouraging my ministry. I doubt if any of the others are still living. Otis Gatewood, from Meadow near Lubbock (whose wine-colored suit with a coat whose lining was threadbare I still remember), had burning zeal for evangelism. Due to his influence and that of others, there were a dozen or more young people of Rochester who became preachers, part-time preachers, and missionaries or their wives. His life-long influence on evangelism was widespread throughout our fellowship.

N. B. Hardeman's books of "Tabernacle Sermons" were the most available source of ready-made sermons for the preacher boys at ACC. No doubt, he would have been pleased and in awe to know how effectively these young men declaimed his sermons from the pulpits of West Texas around Abilene. If they could preach like that, why could I not do so also? Mom's aspiration for George and me was that we become preachers though Dad expressed no enthusiasm in that direction. Preachers, both young and old, were often guests in our "humble abode" on the farm. So, with spoken and unspoken encouragement, each of us began to visualize ourselves in that capacity. The gizzard stones were grinding.

Only in more recent times have I begun to realize the heritage that influenced the doctrinal convictions that I had been proclaiming. It goes back much further than the preacher boys who were near my age. Our Stone-Campbell Movement, begun in the early 1800s, was not an effort to draw believers from existing churches into a "one, true church." Rather it was an effort to break down the walls of rejection that existed between them. The converts of the Stone people and the Campbell people demonstrated this by recognition of each other as brethren in Lexington, Kentucky in 1832 though they did not agree on everything doctrinally or wear the same church designations.

There is a dark chapter in this history that our people generally ignored, however. As time moved on, there began to be insistence upon conformity in doctrine and practice. Argumentation was a fertile field for the development of legalism and proof-text patternism. Carl Ketcherside dealt masterfully with a milestone in our movement which was unknown to me before. It can be read in my edited book, *“Our Heritage of Unity and Fellowship,”* Chapter 13, *“The Sand Creek Address,”* and is worth the price of the book. At a meeting of about 6000 disciples on August 17, 1889 at Sand Creek, Illinois, according to agreement, Daniel Sommer delivered a discourse on “Innovations” followed by the reading of an *“Address and Declaration”* by Peter P. Warren. After delineating on those innovations, it was concluded that “we are impelled from a sense of duty to say, that all that are guilty of teaching, or allowing and practicing the many innovations and corruptions to which we have referred, that after being admonished, and having had sufficient time for reflection, if they do not turn away from such abominations, that we can not and will not regard them as brethren.”

This was a 180-degree reversal of the aim of the Movement. It was the first call for rejection of brothers in Christ who did not conform to the judgments of others who determined the criteria. This was a sort of birth date of the Church of Christ! Or, maybe it was the time of conception, for seventeen years later, David Lipscomb with the approval of other leading brothers of this persuasion, instructed the Census Bureau to list the Church of Christ as a separate body. That was in 1906, just 100 years ago, just twelve years before my birth! Was Christ’s church finally restored in 1906 after centuries of extinction? Alexander Campbell held no such idea but described his work as reformation. Was it a non-denominational church – the one true church? Sincere and intelligent men still contend that we are not a denomination contrary to the statements of our mentor, Campbell himself. In his latter years he lamented that, contrary to his original aims, he realized that he had added another church, a denomination, to the religious scene. (For more on this, read Dr. Leroy Garrett’s “Campbell’s Rude Awakening” in FR 267.)

Zeal, militancy, and bitterness are generally characteristic of break-away groups. There were conciliatory preachers and teachers, but as I recall my earliest memories two decades later, there was a combative, debating spirit pervading. Since conformity in every jot and tittle was thought to be necessary for salvation, each had to be defined. Search for definitions led to proof-texting, legalism, simplistic argumentation, and patternism. Some zealous contenders for truth were the sincerest and most humble of men; some were emotional; some were dogmatic; some were bantering and arrogant. It was not a fight with the outside world but infighting – brother debating brother with both always winning!

Most of the quibbles made into issues related to the assemblies and what was done in them. Bible classes began to be added using some women teachers and uninspired literature. If women were permitted to teach women and children, when did a boy outgrow her classroom? Some began to pass collection plates instead of laying by in store and began offering thanks before the collection. The one cup (actually two glasses) gave way to individual cups (glasses; now plastic “glasses”). Must the “cup” be wine or grape juice (red, of course)? Should the one presiding break the bread before passing it? Was participation in the Supper on a weekday permissible? Should it be served on Sunday evening for morning absentees? Was it to be taken to shut-ins? Who was worthy to partake? Must women wear hats (veils!) in worship? Could an unbaptized boy lead a

song? What about solos and quartets? All of these things were debated and often made into divisive issues with fragmented groups rejecting others who did not practice the combination of scruples they espoused. But all were united against instrumental accompaniment, clapping, incense, candles, and other additions to our supposed “five acts of worship.”

These dividing lines were fairly well defined by the champions of their causes during the 1920s and 1930s. In Rochester, wires were stretched across the building with khaki curtains forming “classrooms.” Women taught women and children. Individual cups were introduced and the Supper was available Sunday evening. After debate, various congregations chose their own courses. So, who were we preacher boys to challenge the champions? We just accepted what we had been taught in our own congregations. We swallowed the grit thinking it was the seed of the kingdom. All of these groups were entrenched by the time of WWII except for the controversy over congregational cooperation. For me it seemed that issue was created out of party spirit and jealousy by men who devised a white horse to ride on. I did not see justification of rejecting other disciples over the controversy. Even the week before the Tant-Harper debate, I led the singing in a meeting with Yater Tant in Lafayette, Louisiana.

The war opened the eyes of soldiers and others to open doors for world-wide evangelism. So there was a great thrust to reach the lost. Laudable as that was, however, it was a mixed blessing. All of these divisive issues went along as baggage into all the world. It was as though the saving gospel depended upon correctness of all doctrinal details. Devoted workers both at home and abroad often confused proselyting with evangelizing.

If you are judging me as being too harsh and critical toward others, let me assure you that I am being most critical of myself. So many of these divisive gizzard stones were thrown into my diet that I did not realize what they were doing to me. It seems that I should have been able to see more clearly. I am dismayed that it took me so long to begin to see my misdirection. God has been and still is patient with me, and I trust that my labor, even my most misguided efforts, has not been in vain. And I can feel fully with all of you who recognize that we have been shaped so much by the reactionary period that preceded us. Thank God, a more Christ-centered, grace-oriented, and unifying message is being heard in our congregations now. Those old reactionary gizzard stones did not serve us well in Rochester or in your town. []

(Cecil Hook: February 2006)