

John W. McGarvey

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John McGarvey was one of the leading voices for conservatism in the Restoration Movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He is not often remembered by Disciples these days, but in the Independent Christian Churches and the non-instrumental Churches of Christ he is still considered something of a saint by those who know about him. He was born in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, on March 1, 1829. His father was from Ireland; his mother was a girlhood pupil of Barton W. Stone. After his father died at a young age, his mother remarried. Her new husband, unhappy with raising children in a slave state, moved the family to Illinois.

McGarvey entered Alexander Campbell's Bethany College in 1847. His first year studies included Latin and Greek. He particularly enjoyed the early morning Bible lectures by Campbell. These were not always universally appreciated by other students. One day Campbell noticed one was asleep. He called on the unfortunate student and said to him, "Young man, tell me something important that happened in Mesopotamia." The student woke with a start and said, "I believe, sir, that is where God created the world."

For the next two years McGarvey taught school in Fayette, Illinois, and worked to improve his knowledge of the Bible. In September of 1852 he became the minister of three churches in Fayette, Ashland, and Mount Pleasant, Illinois, while continuing his teaching.

After preaching for a week in Dover, Missouri, he was called to be the pastor of that congregation. He gave up teaching and became a full-time minister in January, 1853. A few months later he married Alwayanna Francis Hix. During his time in Dover he engaged in debates in order to advance the restoration cause, and wrote articles for the *American Christian Review*, a popular Disciples magazine, as well as for Alexander Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger*. He also began working on a commentary on the Book of Acts which would later be regarded as one of his most important books.

When the Civil War began McGarvey opposed secession and took a pacifist position. He saw the war as contrary to the teachings of Christ, and through sermons and articles he hoped to keep the church out of war. Such sentiments were considered treasonous in the North, but McGarvey held firm throughout the war years.

In 1862, after nine years at Dover, McGarvey was called to be the pastor of Main Street Christian Church in Lexington, Kentucky.

That church was once the site of the Campbell-Rice Debate moderated by Henry Clay. Later, after McGarvey's time, the church moved to a new location and became Central Christian Church as it is known today. McGarvey's picture, along with other past and present pastors, still hangs in the fellowship area at Central.

The congregation was deeply divided over the Civil War, and McGarvey worked successfully to hold the congregation together. For a time the church was used as a military hospital, first for the Confederate army and later for Union soldiers. Church services were held in the Odd Fellows Hall for several months until the congregation was allowed to return to its building.

McGarvey was offered several college teaching positions in mathematics, literature, and language, first at Bethany College and later at Kentucky University in Harrodsburg. He declined, but said that he would be interested in a position teaching the Bible if that opportunity ever presented itself.

In 1865, Kentucky University moved to Lexington and took over the campus of the defunct Transylvania College. The curators of the university decided to establish on the campus a college for the preparation of preachers. To be called the College of the Bible, it opened with Robert Milligan as President and J. W. McGarvey as Professor of Sacred History. At first, McGarvey taught and continued to serve the Main Street church, but in 1867 he resigned the pulpit and served two country churches to allow more time for scholarship. In reality, for most of its early history, John McGarvey was the College of the Bible.

Main Street Christian Church was so successful that an overflow crowd had to have another service in the Odd Fellows Hall. The group was considered part of Main Street and operated under Main Street's governing board. In time, the people wanted to have their own church, separate from Main Street. A Presbyterian church on Broadway had closed and the building became available. In May, 1870, Broadway Christian Church was established in the former Presbyterian building, and McGarvey was called to be its pastor while still teaching at the College of the Bible. Typical of many Disciples at that time, he said that when he entered the pulpit, the gospel would be preached in that Presbyterian building for the first time in history.

McGarvey believed that only the Disciples had the real gospel truth. Once, while looking at a large Catholic cathedral with a friend, McGarvey said he looked forward to the day when that church would be part of the Disciples movement.

McGarvey served Broadway Christian for twelve years until the demands of teaching made it wise for him to resign. He would

teach at the College of the Bible from its founding in 1865 until his death in 1911, and serve as president from 1895 until 1911.

His *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* was completed in the midst of the Civil War and was published by Franklin and Rice Publishers in Cincinnati in 1863. A new edition would appear in 1892. He was also involved in two periodicals, *Lard's Quarterly*, which lasted three years, and *The Apostolic Times*.

One of McGarvey's best known books was *Lands of the Bible*, the result of a trip he took to the Holy Land. A book of more than 600 pages, it immediately sold 15,000 copies, huge for that day. It described the geography and features of Palestine and was widely used in colleges and seminaries for many years. In 1866 he published *Text and Canon of the New Testament*. A second volume, *Credibility and Inspiration of the New Testament* was prepared, but the manuscript was destroyed by a fire in 1877 along with a lifetime of scholarship and all the personal possessions of the family. He resumed work on the book, however, and it was later published by the Standard Publishing Company.

In 1893, McGarvey began a regular column in the *Christian Standard*, a widely circulated Disciple magazine. He called it the Department of Biblical Criticism. His purpose was to oppose new approaches to Biblical scholarship, historical critical scholarship, that had originated in Germany.

The issue that aroused McGarvey's opposition was the authorship of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Traditionally, people believed that Moses wrote it, but in the nineteenth century scholars began to raise questions about it. They noticed, for example, that if you read Genesis 1 and 2 carefully you will see two very different accounts of the creation of the world. There are many other examples of two and sometimes three versions of the same event as well as a variety of theological perspectives. This led scholars to conclude that the Pentateuch is the result of multiple authorship, that there were at least four authors or groups of authors whose works were finally edited into the books as we know them now.

McGarvey believed that these methods of scholarship were destructive, and used the pages of the *Christian Standard* to explain his opposition.. At age 70 he published a book he regarded as the crowning achievement of his career, *The Authorship of the Book of Deuteronomy With its Bearings on the Higher Criticism of the Pentateuch*.

Historical criticism is a highly technical field, requiring an extensive background of knowledge to engage in it. McGarvey,

however, was skillful in dealing with these issues in a way that the average person could understand. He attacked his opponents and discredited them so that his readers assumed the issues were settled. Of course, they were not.

Due to his column's popularity, he was invited to present his views at a Bible Institute in Moberly, Missouri. His subject was the authorship of the Pentateuch and he spoke twice a day for five days. He began by presenting the views of the higher critics and used as an example S. R. Driver's *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, a book that was used in many mainline Protestant seminaries. Having explained the critical viewpoint, he then turned to his own position. He studied every passage that critics had used to discredit Mosaic authorship and demonstrated why he thought their opinion was wrong. One of his arguments was that Jesus and the apostles believed Moses wrote the Pentateuch. It was a question of believing Christ or the critics.

McGarvey was involved in a serious controversy that would change the nature of the College of the Bible. A member of the board of curators, John B. Bowman, had raised \$200,000 for the endowment of Kentucky University. He added a medical school and a law school. In addition, he persuaded the state legislature to create an agricultural and mechanical college to be housed on the campus.

In appreciation for his generosity, the curators gave Bowman virtual control of Kentucky University. Unfortunately, the endowment was not enough to support all of the programs he wanted for the university. McGarvey believed that the interests of the Disciples in the school were being ignored. He complained loudly in the newspapers and, as a result, was removed from his professorship.

Disciples in Kentucky were unhappy about this outcome. Consequently, the Board of Curators granted the Kentucky Christian Education Society the right to nominate professors for the College of the Bible. It nominated Robert Graham as President, and John McGarvey as Professor of Sacred History. However, McGarvey and Graham received only about one third of their salaries, and the curators said that only McGarvey could be retained. This meant a virtual suspension of the College of the Bible.

Consequently, a movement began among Kentucky Disciples to have a new College of the Bible that would be independent of Kentucky University. A board of managers was appointed, funds were raised, Robert Graham was appointed President and John McGarvey and I. B. Grubbs were the faculty. However, there were still financial difficulties.

One again the Kentucky Christian Education Society went to work. Graham, McGarvey and Grubbs solicited funds and a new improved College of the Bible opened in 1877. Classes were held in the basement of Main Street Christian Church. Eventually, Kentucky University, which later became Transylvania University, offered the College of the Bible the use of its classrooms. The success of the College of the Bible necessitated new facilities, and a new building was erected on the Transylvania campus, the interior of which was designed by McGarvey.

His teaching method was developed in light of the kinds of students he had. Many, in the early days, came from rural areas where their high school educations were inadequate. They often did not know how to study. McGarvey wanted them to know the Biblical narrative. Each day he would recite a scripture passage which he had committed to memory. Then he would give a list of questions for the students to study and answer. The next day he would present the passage again, and the students would recite.

He kept his notes in small black books with the Bible divided into parts, sections, and paragraphs. Under each paragraph he would list the questions he intended to ask his students along with references that would help them answer. He taught four different Bible courses and revised one course each year. In 1893 these notes were printed, and by this time there had been seven revisions of each course.

One of the major issues among Disciples in the nineteenth century was the use of musical instruments in worship. The general feeling was that it was an unscriptural innovation. For twenty years McGarvey wrote articles opposing the use of instruments, particularly organs, in the *American Christian Review*. However, sentiment began to change on the issue. Churches in the cities began to install and use organs, and their use gradually spread to rural areas. McGarvey's beloved Broadway Christian Church voted to have one. He asked the church to postpone the action until after his death, but the church went ahead anyway. When he saw that opposition would be in vain, he decided to leave Broadway and join the Chestnut Street Christian Church which still did not use musical instruments.

In the last year of his life McGarvey wrote a series of "reveries" for the *Christian Standard*. These seemed to reflect that he knew the end of his life was near. He died in the evening of October 6, 1911. His final words were, "O Lord, I come, I come." The *Lexington Leader* described McGarvey as "one of the great leaders of church thought in America."

McGarvey regarded his book, *The Authorship of Deuteronomy*, as his greatest intellectual achievement. He believed

that Deuteronomy was the key to the truth or falsity of the higher critics. If they were wrong about the date of that book, he believed, their case would collapse. Mainline scholars today believe that part of Deuteronomy was the book found in the Temple during the reign of King Josiah in the seventh century BCE.

McGarvey believed that the entire Pentateuch, or Law, of the Old Testament was written by Moses and was the basis for Israel's religion. This religion was perfectly developed in the beginning, but it declined. It was the work of the prophets to bring people back to obedience of Moses' law. The higher critics said that Israel's religion began at a primitive level and developed over time. McGarvey insisted that the historical parts of the Bible were accurate. His only interest in the prophets was their predictions. He was firm in his belief in the infallibility and literal meaning of the Bible.

McGarvey was basically self-taught. Although he read the work of the higher critics, he never had any personal contact with them or with other scholars at universities or elsewhere. His dream was for the College of the Bible to become the greatest seat of Biblical learning in the world, but that would never happen because of his narrow view of the field. He could not imagine that those who disagreed with him might also be people of devout faith.

Nevertheless, he was loved by his students as a kind, warm, and caring person. In his day he was a major influence on the Disciples of Christ in their belief in the centrality of the Bible to Christian faith.