# **THE RELEVANCE OF F. B. SRYGLEY**

# **TO CHURCHES OF CHRIST**

# **IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

# **Part Three**

# We come now to the third and final division of our study concerning the Relevance of F.B. Srygley to Churches of Christ in the Twenty-First Century. In Part Two consideration was given to scope of Srygley’s controversial writings, his understanding of the New Testament church, his battles with premillennialism, and his views on human institutions operated by Christians. He is by no means a standard of authority on the things about which he wrote. His relevance does not rest in his views, but rather in his continuing the conservative tradition among churches of Christ, the manner of his reasoning in dealing with controversies of his day, and his ability to ardently defend what he believe to be right and to oppose what he believed to be wrong while maintaining a kindly attitude toward those with whom he differed. We now turn to the last of the reasons we believe F.B. Srygley holds relevance for churches of Christ today.

**Tenth, Srygley fought any attempt to gloss over the *Scriptural* differencesbetween “the churches of Christ” and the “Christian Church” (as they existed then).**

In this he anticipated the compromising disposition that would seek unity between the two separated “brotherhoods” without correcting the errors that caused the division. It was the “Murch-Witty” unity movement that called Srygley’s attention to this issue. While there were earlier efforts to create a reunion of the separated churches, the first noticeable effort arose in the 1930s. Although the movement involved but few preachers or churches, it attracted considerable attention and much was written about it. The move-ment is named for its leaders: Claude E. Witty, minister of the West Side Central Church of Christ in Detroit, Michigan, and James DeForest Murch, a Christian Church preacher allied with the *Christian Standard* in Cincinnati, Ohio. It sought to “reconcile the two associations of the Christian churches and non-instrumental Churches of Christ,” as Murch described it.

In the early 1930s, James D. Murch conceived a program to affect unity between the conservative Christian Church and the churches of Christ. The program, called “Christian Action,” led to a series of acts promoted by Murch and Witty to bring about the desired unity. They planned a series of “small face-to-face” conferences between “leaders in both groups.” The first was in Cincinnati, February 23, 1937, with more following in other cities. From these there developed a five-point, so-called, “Approach to Unity.” The proposed points included: Prayer, Survey (to determine commonality of faith and practice), Friendliness, Co-operation (in activities that did no violence to personal or group convictions), and Study and Discussion.

The first “National Unity Meeting” was held at Detroit in May 1938. Another was in Indianapolis the following year. These continued several years, but accomplished little, except to expose a doctrinal softness among some in churches of Christ who were willing to accept such a union with the Christian Churches. The *Christian Standard* and the *Christian-Evangelist*, Christian Church related publications, favored the Murch-Witty movement. However, among the churches of Christ, only the *Christian Leader* and *Word and Work*, were friendly to it. The *Gospel Advocate*, at first was “in violent opposition,” but later joined with the *Firm Foundation* in “studiously ignoring the movement.”1

L.L. Brigance, H. Leo Boles, and other well-known preachers opposed the plan. Brigance saw it as “a plain proposition to set aside the authority of God’s word and substitute that of human opinion.” Boles wrote: “It is a denominational effort at unity.” He said in regard to societies and instrumental music: “There could be no compromise with those who persisted in the use of these innovations when the division came, and there can be no compromise with them now…. It is sinful for brethren to encourage a compromise on these errors. The Gospel Advocate would be unfaithful to the brotherhood and the cause of Christ if it failed to warn the Lord’s people of these attempted efforts of compromise.”2

Although the Murch-Witty movement began near the end of Srygley’s life, none opposed it more vigorously. He wrote extensively about it and sharply criticized it and those who encouraged it. Leroy Garrett says: “Witty was unable to sell the idea to his people. The leading Church of Christ papers either ignored or opposed the effort, and while he was able to bring such eminent leaders as H. Leo Boles to the forums, they were not as irenic as he, sometimes using language that was counter productive.”3 Through the combined effects of either fighting it or ignoring it, the movement faded in the 1940s. But the idea of unity through compromise resurfaced in later years. After World War II, some worked for such “unity” among the segments of the Restoration Movement, notably Earnest Beam, Carl Ketcherside, and Leroy Garrett.

Srygley opposed the Murch-Witty movement from its inception. He saw the danger it posed to apostolic Christianity. He knew there were many among churches of Christ, not excluding the publisher of the *Gospel Advocate*, who favored a more irenic attitude toward those who used the instrument in worship. Therefore, he spoke out strongly against the effort for the remaining three years of his life. His perception of a softening attitude among his brethren no doubt prompted his forthright observations.

When a brother, writing in the *Christian Leader* referred to the first Murch-Witty unity gatherings as, “Two Portentous Meetings,” Srygley observed: “I do not think that anything very good can possibly come from such meetings…. Only a few preachers have attended so far, but what can these preachers do with their respective groups? Suppose the preachers should unite, can they deliver the goods? By what authority do they even meet? If they meet without authority, how could they expect to put their conclusions off on their groups?”4

Srygley thought the use of “portentous” might “come to be a fine description of the meetings.” Explaining, he said: “The first definition of the word is ‘foreshadowing evil, ominous, sinister’; the second is ‘remarkable.’ It may be that this word ‘portentous’ was the correct word, and that the first definition is the correct one—‘foreshadowing evil.’ What about the meeting is remarkable? Such meetings have been pro-posed before. Some of these same brethren met with M. C. Kurfees and others in some kind of a meeting. These meetings are not remarkable in any sense. The brother who named the meetings could have described them with a small word, and his readers would not have been compelled to go to the dictionary, as I was, to know what it meant.”5

After the first meetings were publicized, Srygley put the matter into perspective. “What passage will they read from the New Testament that will give any authority for two groups that call themselves Christians, with different faith and practice, to unite? Brethren Murch and Witty call the thing they are trying to do ‘Christian Unity,’ but they are not trying to effect unity—they are seeking to bring about union. Can they not see the difference between unity and union?... It is a pity to spoil a nice little plaything like they have launched, but the truth will do it. If every preacher preached exactly like the apostles did, there would be no need for union and they would be together; and if they did not get together that way, they would be wrong even if they united…. If brother Witty is preaching or practicing anything in religion that is not authorized by Christ or the apostles, he should quit it, whether Brother Murch or anybody else quits it or not. If he is leaving out anything that the apostles taught, he ought to begin at once to preach it, whatever Murch or any one else may do; and so should Brother Murch act, whether Witty does or not. If I preach the truth, and nothing but the truth, will I be held accountable for division in the body of Christ? How much are they willing to give up for unity? I am willing to give up everything that is mine, but I could not give up one jot or tittle—no, not even a half jot or half a half tittle—of what belongs to God for union or anything else.”6

Eleventh, Srygley understood as well as any man could before the fact that *the attitude* manifested by some brethren would inevitably lead to apostasy.

The sunset years of Srygley’s life saw events that helped pave the way for the liberalism that swept through the churches of Christ in the l940s and 1950s. Srygley was aware of these conditions and spoke of them often. Several things gave foreboding signs of the future: indifference toward the true mission of the church, disunity among the brethren reflected in an apparent liberal-conservative rift, disrespect for Bible authority, compromise with religious error, and softness in preaching. Srygley was aware of all of these developments, but three things in particular magnified the danger he saw: the propensity for human institutions; the apologetic attitude of many brethren toward R.H. Boll and premillennialists in the church; and the growing emphasis on located preachers.There were also other trends that Srygley called attention to that, in his way of thinking, would lead away from the apostolic order.Yet, in spite of these, he remained guardedly optimistic that faithful men would hold the line against departures from the faith.

There were strong indications that a spirit of compromise was active among the churches of Christ during the 1930s. But the most apparent of these was the attitude of many brethren toward premillennialism and the attempt to affect a sort of union with the Christian Church as reflected by the Murch-Witty meetings. The unity movement in the end did not accomplish much mainly because it was strongly opposed by faithful preachers. But it reflected an apparent spirit of compromise, which showed that many were ready for some sort of an accommodation with the Christian Church.

Premillennialism also figured into the Murch-Witty movement because Murch was a premillennialist and any bargain struck with him would be a compromise on premillennialism, as well as on instrumental music in Christian worship. But the toleration of premillennialism was the most evident symptom of compromise. The divisions the doctrine created were largely under the surface. Srygley said: “There are not very many who will come out boldly and admit that they are premillennialists, but there are some who will not oppose the doctrine themselves nor encourage others who do oppose it. Loyalty to the church demands that we oppose that which belittles the church. Christ established the church and gave his life for it. He bought it with his precious blood. He turned it over to his people without spot or blemish or any such thing. Shall we not as his people stand for the church above everything?”7

There were other indications that a spirit of compromise was present among churches of Christ in the l930s. The softness of many toward premillennialism reverberated in a general softness toward error and a reluctance to fight for the truth. It is not certain whether the attitude of many toward premillennialism tended to a general softness, or that a general softness caused them to be tolerant toward premillennialism. But the attitude toward the latter was by far the more dangerous because the doctrine in effect undermined the church and its place in the plan of salvation.

The decades of the 1930s and 1940s saw the rise in several quarters a desire for a significant change in the direction the churches of Christ had traveled for the past fifty years. Younger men, and some older ones as well, were demanding less rigidity in the inflexible conservatism that had characterized the churches in the past. The country’s entrance into World War II not long after Srygley’s death delayed the growth of institutionalism, but by the end of the 1940s, the restraining voice of F.B. Srygley was gone. The post war years brought a division among the churches over institutions. But Srygley saw the “red and threatening” clouds of change and, knowing from experience how to discern the face of the sky, he knew there was “foul weather” ahead, and he warned his brethren about it.

Near the beginning of Srygley’s last decade, he wrote: “With some, it is a very little matter just to preach the gospel and by so doing build up simple churches of Christ. They will admit that this will save man; but too many of us want a bigger job than that. We want to do something we think is worth while. Saving sinners and comforting saints is a small business in the estimation of some. Man seems to want something in religion that not only he can point to with pride, but something that others can see after he is gone. Visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction and praying with the sick and dying is but a little matter with some of us. Preaching the gospel to the poor, and by the gospel saving men from sin and destruction, is too little a matter for some of us. ‘Extending our organizations’ sounds bigger with some men than preaching the simple gospel and saving sinners. Building fine meetinghouses and what they call ‘educational plants’ and getting the church head over heels in debt so that we can make ‘drives’ for funds and put on ‘programs’ and ‘campaigns’ to raise money for our organizations sounds to some like we are doing something; but to be humble Christians and nothing more, in the estimation of some, is doing very little. If the hard times though which we are passing will bring us back to the simple way and to the church, the only divine institution in the world for the salvation of man, then the depression will be the best thing that has happened to us in the present generation.”8

Cecil Willis articulated historically what Srygley was seeing prophetically in the last years of his life. Willis wrote: “In many senses, 1938 was the tragic beginning of modern history for the Churches of Christ. History has a way of forming itself into different periods. 1938 marked the beginning of … an era of chronic controversy and bitter division, the end of which is yet unseen…. The last quarter of a century [1938-1964] has been one of repeated controversies within Churches of Christ. Yet most of these controversies have somehow been related to the church and its relationship to human organizations. It would be inaccurate to say this problem arose in 1938 … But beginning with 1938, the attention of the brotherhood again came to be more directly turned toward a study of whether the church could contribute its funds to support works done through human organizations. ”9

When digression threatened to destroy the pursuit of apostolic Christianity among churches of Christ, the *Gospel Advocate* stood “like a seawall against the tide.” This was in the latter years of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century. The men who composed the editorial staff of the *Advocate* in those years began to be called “the old guard.” G.C. Brewer said he first heard the term used when he was a student at the Nashville Bible school [1905] and that it was then used in reference to the *Advocate* staff. He added: “Brother Srygley saw his comrades fall one by one until all who had known him in his prime were gone. He said ‘farewell’ to them, but cherished the hope of soon joining them in the home over there.’”10 John T. Lewis beautifully described this epithet as it applied to Srygley. “The passing of F.B. Srygley removed from the editorial staff of the Gospel Advocate the last name of that galaxy of men who for more than fifty years made the Advocate a tower of strength for the ‘old paths.’”11

Twelfth, Srygley possessed an apostolic view of the work of a *gospel preacher* and taught other preachers by example and word how to conduct their ministry.

# He wrote frequently on the subject of preachers and preaching. He understood what Christ and the apostles demanded of those who preach the word and he sought to faithfully follow it for sixty years. He was as fervent in his desire for preachers to imitate the apostolic order in preaching as he was in his desire for all Christians to imitate the teaching of the apostles in living the Christian life. He used his pen to instruct those who undertook this noble work, but he was critical of those who acted contrary to the divine standard. His editorials, both directly and indirectly, touched on almost every phase of the preacher’s life and work. He sought to drive home the point that: “It is the gospel that saves and not the preacher who preaches it.”

# In writing about preachers and preaching, Srygley discussed the nature of the vocation itself, as well as the training, duties, and behavior of those who preach the word. If his editorials were often caustic and critical on this topic, it was because he believed that some of his brethren, especially in his later years, were attempting to follow the denominational concept of the ministry, or because they were teaching things contrary to the New Testament order.

# He fought hard to keep the preachers from becoming a special class in the church. “As far as I am concerned,” he said, “I do not make as much distinction between the preacher, or ‘our minister,’ and other good Christians as some of my brethren seem to make. I think in these days, when there is not that distinction between the inspired and uninspired teacher as there was in New Testament times, the greatest thing now is a Christian, an humble child of God. This is the greatest and best thing we have now. To my way of thinking, the human race is divided into two classes—men and women; but many seem to think it is divided into three classes—men, women, and preachers…. I am trying to get away, as far as possible, from the preacher-class idea in my thinking and acting. In the church now we are all brethren, and ‘my preaching brethren’ are just my brethren in the Lord.”12

# Srygley’s view the preacher’s education was in keeping with the work itself. In answering the claim that preachers should be highly educated in the secular field, he wrote: “If all of these things have not ruined the young brother, he might take up the New Testament and obey Paul’s charge to Timothy to ‘preach the word.’ He might, in spite of all this, go among the poor and preach the gospel to them. He might still comfort the dying and pray for the erring ones. He might learn to eat their poor food, sleep on hard beds, and finally learn to advise with the poor renter how to make more corn grow in a row. He might learn to point out to them how to make their homes more comfortable and teach them how to live more in harmony with the laws of nature, and thus be healthy here and go to that home where trouble and sorrow never come.”13

In reply to Jonas W.D. Skiles’ supposed educational neglect of preachers, Srygley said: “I have not noticed such a neglect. It is true we had but few men that went to college in the early day, but because of that fact it could not be said that they were not educated. I think we had the best logicians, the best religious historians, and the men that had clearer insight into the teaching of the Bible of any people in this country. They were better informed on the needful things of this world than any other people. I think these men were truly educated, though they never saw the inside of a college or a university in their lives…. I am wondering where Brother Skiles was reared that this great advantage of what he calls the ‘educated ministry’ was so marked. It was not true in the hills where I grew up. We had schools in those days, and the teachers emphasized the worth of a college degree … but the men who converted the people were out enduring hardship as good soldiers of Jesus Christ.”14

# Srygley felt that it was the duty of preachers to preach against error. He said: “Of course as long as men keep preaching error, it will be necessary to preach against the error taught. Some of my friends would be glad for me to stop preaching or writing against these speculation theories, and I would be glad to do it. And I could do it if these brethren would stop preaching these things, but they will not do that. They want to preach their foolish theories, and criticize brethren for preaching against them. Some of these brethren of mine criticize my manner of preaching against this doctrine. We ought to be allowed to improve our manner without stopping preaching the truth. There is no way to stop error except by showing that it is error. They say these men are good moral men, but it’s not a question of morality, but of doctrine.”15

The need for preachers to be humble was strongly urged by Srygley. Somewhat sarcastically, he said: “It is very hard for a brother, that feels that he is competent to do a great work, to settle down to being only a humble Christian and preach the gospel to the poor and visit the dying and encourage those that are out of the way to return to duty and to God. Any ordinary man can do that. But why should I waste all my life in such a small service? I am prepared for better things and a greater work than that. I ought to be at the head of some kind of an institution, and I am too religious not to work in some way for the church; but, beloved, the only way to work for the church is to work according to Christ’s teaching as a member of the church. There is no organization in the church except the local congregation and not as much there as some men think there is. It is a pity that money and moneyed institutions have the influence over the churches of Christ that they have. Some people actually think that money can convert the world, when, as a matter of fact, it stands in the way of pure New Testament Christianity. Let schools be schools and papers be papers, but let the body of Christ be the church.”16

As noticed, Srygley was not keen on located preachers, especially those that assumed a professional attitude toward their work and wanted to “run the church.” “This thing of a located preacher taking charge of a church, it seems to me, is outside of the Bible. I remember years ago when I lived in Lebanon, Tenn., that the church there asked M.C. Kurfees to hold a meeting for it. He and I walked down to the square, and I was introducing him to the businessmen and others on the square, and we met Chancellor Green, who was at the head of what was then called the University of Lebanon. Chancellor Green said: ‘Brother Kurfees, I believe you have charge of a church in Louisville, Ky.’ ‘No,’ said Kurfees, ‘a church in Louisville has charge of me.’ This reply of Kurfees sounded good to me, than, and it would sound as good or even better now.”17

There was an abundance of preachers in Nashville. In regard to this, Srygley wrote: “Sometimes you hear brethren say that the preachers should be scattered out of Nashville. That cannot be done, because, with the institutions we have now in and around Nashville and the churches that are rapidly being prepared for the located preachers, as Christ said of the poor, we will always have them with us. Some of the churches are already beginning to feel that the located preacher is more important than a scriptural eldership.”18 Srygley was not inconsistent in reference to his own Nashville residence for most of his work was done in evangelizing outside of the city and he preached in the city only by appointments, never as a “located preacher.”

Hardly a facet in a preacher work escaped Srygley’s pen, at one time or another. In dealing with the perennial relationship of older and younger preachers, he said: “Businessmen sometimes make a mistake by turning off men who are better prepared for work than the younger ones they hire in their places. In some respects old men are prepared better to preach than younger men who are thought to be better prepared for leadership in the church. But they say that the young men can lead the young people better than the older men, and the result is that we have a young people’s church instead of a church controlled by the elders. Naturally older men have a better knowledge of the Scriptures, as they have had time and opportunity to learn more. They have lost the graceful movement of the body, and with some this is a great asset lost. There ought to be room in the vineyard of the Lord for the young and the old. There should be no rivalry between the old and the young in their work.”19

The *attitude* of preachers was a subject on which Srygley often remarked. He once said: “[M]uch of the truth that is being used these days is given with a medicine dropper. Too much *truth* preached these days is preached in small quantities, and the doses are far apart. We have a fear that we think too much of what we call love for our friends and not enough of the love of the truth. Friendship is a good thing when we can hold it and preach the truth but it is a great evil when we have to compromise the truth to hold our friendship This is too great a price for friendship. We act friendly with every one, whether he is our friend or not. But first we should be a friend of Christ. He is our friend. ‘Ye are my friends, ‘said the Lord, ‘if you keep my commandments.’ We are not real friends to any if we withhold from them the truth which they need.”20

Srygley deplored an affected piety in preachers. He said: “Some preachers that appear to be very pious can sometimes make the bitterest enemies. True piety is all right, but, like humility, it cannot be shown by facial appearance, but both must be shown by pious, good deeds. When we try to make faces to show either, we naturally show the opposite. One of these pious-looking fellows told me something he said I did and said which I am positively sure I did not do nor say, but because I did not confess them he tried to prove I was *non compos mentis*, or words to that effect. This kind of piety has a tendency to sicken me. The Lord reward him according to his deeds.”21

When Srygley was taken ill for the last time, he left an unfinished article on his desk at the *Gospel Advocate* office. In that fragment, Srygley penned his final words intended for publication. It had been fifty-eight years since his initial article for the *Advocate*, written while he was a student at Mars’ Hill College, was publishedJanuary 26, 1882. It was simply entitled, “The Tongue.” It is a remarkable coincidence that the theme of his valedictory offering would be on the thoughts of man. No traits of a gospel preacher are more important than his thoughts and his words, and few men ever blended the two with greater skill than F.B. Srygley.

In that final morsel, Srygley wrote: “No one is better than his thoughts. An evil disposition will be formed from evil thoughts. Some one may say, ‘I am unable to control my thoughts,’ but man can control his thoughts. I have the power to take my mind off this paper and turn my mind away from it, send my thoughts to Europe and the many things that are taking place there; but if I knew nothing of what is going on in Europe, I could not think about it. We think about what we know something about. Our knowledge may be faulty; and, when it is, our thoughts will be faulty also.”22

Many men who knew F.B. Srygley well said a good many good things about him and his ministry. I would like to conclude this discussion with the words of a present day historian whose exceptional understanding of Restoration history is widely acknowledged and greatly respected by his contemporaries. I refer to Terry J. Gardner of Indianapolis. In a letter to me regarding the old warrior from Rock Creek, Alabama, Terry wrote: “Srygley was an outstanding debater, an excellent preacher and a fine writer. His words sparkled with wit and wisdom.” It is this, it seems to me, that gives an almost timeless quality to Srygley’s numerous editorials.

**Notes**

1James D. Murch, *Christians Only*.

2*Gospel Advocate*, Aug. 7, 1941.

3Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell* Movement.

4*Gospel Advocate*, April 8, 1937.

5Ibid.

6*Gospel Advocate*, Oct. 14, 1937.

7Ibid., Nov. 3, 1938.

8Ibid., April 20, 1933.

9Cecil Willis, *W. W. Otey*.

10*Gospel Advocate*, May 23, 1940.

11Ibid., May 23, 1940.

12Ibid., July 1, 1937.

13Ibid.*,* Sept. 12, 1935.

14Ibid.*,* Aug. 29, 1935.

15Ibid., Aug. 27, 1936.

16Ibid., Oct. 17, 1929.

17Ibid., Aug. 10, 1939.

18Ibid., Sept. 17, 1936.

19Ibid., Nov. 10, 1938.

20Ibid., March 9, 1939.

21Ibid., Sept. 22, 1938.

22Ibid.*,* Feb. 22, 1940.)

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