**Harmonious Individuality, Part 2**

**John William McGARVEY and Isaac Errett**

John William McGarvey and Isaac Errett were giants in the Restoration Movement. They were contemporary and represent two attitudes in the movement that divided the churches. A more balanced study of this kind would be a three way comparison, including perhaps David Lipscomb. While no two men of the movement were exactly alike in beliefs and practice, these three would represent the major branches of the movement as it developed in the last half of the nineteenth century among the second generation restorers. Lipscomb, in the mold of Tolbert Fanning, Benjamin Franklin, and Jacob Creath, Jr., belongs to the more conservative branch of the movement, continuing the principles of Alexander Campbell in his *Christian Baptist* and earlier *Millennial Harbinger* years. Errett held a loose interpretation of the movement. He belongs to the group that includes W.K. Pendleton, J.H. Garrison, and L.L. Pinkerton. McGarvey occupied a more middle ground. He was in that class of men who include Robert Graham, Moses E. Lard, and B.W. Johnson. However, in this study, we are comparing two men, McGarvey, a conservative, and Errett, a forerunner of liberalism. Valuable lessons may be drawn from both men. As in our review of Campbell and Stone, we will confine the study to a few items of particular interest and in which McGarvey and Errett had the greatest influence on the Restoration Movement.

**1. Their Early Life and Education.** Isaac Errett was born in New York, January 2, 1820. His father, Henry Errett, came from Ireland and his mother from England. They joined an independent church in New York in about 1811. The members were mostly Scotch Baptists. The church held some views of the Haldane movement in the Scotch restoration. In 1820, the church published a pamphlet written by Henry Errett that intimated the relation of baptism to the remission of sins and salvation. Interestingly, both Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott read it and began to see the relationship. Henry Errett died when Isaac was five, leaving his wife to rear seven children. In 1832, they moved to Pittsburgh and worshiped with another independent reforming church. There at the age of twelve Isaac and an older brother were baptized in the Allegheny River. Living in straitened circumstances, Isaac had no opportunity for a formal secondary education. He became a printer’s apprentice and grew to be a master craftsman. He used his leisure time for study and became self-educated. W.T. Moore said: “From the time he was ten years old, he has been dependent upon his own ... exertions for a living; hence, his respectable education has been gathered ... by dint of untiring, industrious application.”1 In 1839-1840, he taught school and gave time to church work. He developed skill as a speaker and soon became a full time preacher, being set apart by the church for that work June 18, 1840.

McGarvey’s father, also born in Ireland, settled in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and entered the dry goods business. His mother was from near Georgetown, Kentucky. McGarvey was born at Hopkinsville, March 1, 1829. His father died while he was a child and his mother married Dr. G.F. Saltenstall, a generous Christian whom McGarvey called “eminently just.” Not wanting his children reared in a slave state, Saltenstall moved his family to Tremont, Illinois, when McGarvey was ten. There McGarvey spent his maturing years. He learned the manufacture of hemp, the production of which made his stepfather prosperous, and obtained a private school education. In 1847, he entered Bethany College where his stepfather was on the board and a close friend of its president. McGarvey was not a Christian at the time, but he was baptized in 1848 by W.K. Pendleton, whom McGarvey regarded as “one of the clearest headed men” he ever knew. Pendleton was the dominant influence on McGarvey at Bethany. They often visited

and McGarvey gave him credit more than any other for molding his views on many important questions.

**2. Their Early Years in the Ministry.** Errett made rapid progress after he began preaching. Besides Pittsburgh, he preached at New Lisbon, Ohio, where Walter Scott had first known success preaching the ancient gospel. He also preached in other places in Ohio and Michigan before moving to Warren, Ohio, in 1851. He divided his ministerial labors between local church work and general evangelism. He became effective in converting sinners, starting churches, and strengthening Christians. He had frequent and intimated association with Walter Scott, Thomas Campbell, Alexander Campbell, and other pioneers of the West. “... his association with these men was of incalculable advantage to him, for they not only gave him valuable instruction in the principles of the Reformation, but he was enabled ... to draw inspiration from their lives, and characters for the great work which he had entered.”2

McGarvey decided soon after his baptism that he would devote his life to preaching the gospel. After an honorable graduation from Bethany in 1850, he went to Fayette, Missouri, where his family had moved. He taught a school for boys one year, not thinking he was yet ready for the ministry. He devoted himself to Bible study while teaching school, and after one term, they invited him to preach for the church in Fayette and he was ordained for that work. He preached two years in Fayette and nearby places before moving to Dover, Missouri, where he married and preached nine years. The young preacher spent about half his time with the church and the rest preaching over the state. He held five public debates during this time. However, his pacifist views made him unpopular when the Civil War began. His support was severely cut and he had to return to teaching school to provide for his family. But in 1862, the Main Street church in Lexington, Kentucky, invited him to preach there. The church was near division over the war, but he kept them together. The Main Street church was the only church in the city that did not divide during the war.

**3. Their Preaching.** In describing Errett, W.T. Moore said: “As a public speaker, he has few, if any superiors. His language is chaste and copious, containing an unusually large per cent, of Saxon words; his gesticulation easy and natural, but his voice, though well under control, has not volume enough to give full force to his beautiful and stirring thoughts.”3 Errett’s extant sermons show that his lessons were clearly thought out, well organized, simply outlined, easy to understand, and scripturally oriented. Moore says: “His writings, like his sermons, are full of strong and rugged points, and are frequently interspersed with brilliant passages of exquisite beauty that will compare favorably with many of the fine word-paintings in the English language.”4 While Errett was loose in his interpretation of Bible, he sought to base his teaching on its authority. He disappointed some of his liberal brethren who were pushing for open membership, when shortly before his death, he preached a strong sermon on, “The Grounds of Christian Fellowship.” This was in the Missouri Lectures of 1886-1888. While he sympathized with Campbell’s views in the Lunenburg letter, Errett said: “My own conviction, not hastily reached, is, that we can not consistently receive into fellowship, in our churches, the unimmersed.”5 He gave four strong and, in my judgment, unanswerable, reasons for his conclusion.

This sermon shows the manner of Errett’s preaching and in it he made some other significant points. Regarding the pioneers, he said: “It does not fatally affect the faith or the faithfulness of the reformers coming out of deep darkness, themselves saturated with traditions and prejudices in which they were educated, that they did not see all truth at once, or escape from all error.” He also said: “Succeeding to them, inheriting their light, warned by their errors and failures, we plead for further reformation. We especially plead for the abandonment of sectarian names, creeds, and organizations, and the restoration of the original terms of fellowship.” Then he added: “Hence, any reformation, to be successful, must be aggressive, and its distinctive features must not be concealed or softened down in timorous subserviency to popular prejudice.” And: “Our duty, then, is to preach the truth—the simple truth—the whole truth of the gospel, and commit it to God to watch over its working.”6 However much these words may conflict with Errett’s interpretation and practice of the truth, his words are true to the restoration ideals.

Concerning McGarvey, Moore says: “That which distinguishes him as a writer and speaker is *clearness*; there is never the slightest confusion in his ideas. He has very little imagination, and relies almost exclusively on *facts* for effect.His mind is well stored with these; and, in the construction and management of an argument, he uses them with great ease and success. In debate he is one of the safest and ablest men among the Disciples, and not the least source of power here is his remarkable *coolness*—he is never thrown off his guard.” “As a teacher, he has few superiors. Knowledge is what the student needs; hence, the *matter-of-fact* man is always the best teacher—all other things being equal. But brother McGarvey is also an excellent preacher, and, as a pastor, has been eminently successful.”7 This quality did not come easy. As a boy, he had such a fiery temper that his mother told him in deepest sincerity that if he did not control himself, he would kill somebody. This so frightened the young man that he learned self-control and became a man of such remarkable restraint that it caused others to marvel.

McGarvey’s preaching reflected his idea of preacher training. His views are expressed in an article on “Ministerial Education” written in He said the best education for a preacher is, “That which produces the best results.” He then named three things he thought essential to this end. (1) A knowledge of the word of God. (2) Proper moral training. On this point, he said, “He should learn how to deport himself toward the world, toward the church and its officers, and toward his brethren in the ministry.” (3) “The last and least important department of ministerial education is an elementary course in literature and science, such as our colleges usually furnish.”McGarvey himself possessed one of the greatest assets a preacher can have: an unblemished integrity. Lipscomb said of him, “He held some unscriptural positions on Bible questions, but would not consciously pervert a passage of Scripture to maintain that position. This can be said of few men.”8

**4. Their Appearance and Manner**. W.T. Moore says: “Brother Errett’s personal appearance is striking and prepossessing. He is about six feet one inch high, has dark auburn hair, light gray eyes, and a well-developed muscular organization…. In the social circle he is companionable, but not a very good conversationalist. He needs the inspiration of an audience, or the quiet solitude of the study, to bring out his full strength; hence, while he is pleasant in company—full of wit and humor—he does not appear there to be to the best advantage.”9

Of McGarvey, Moore wrote: “Brother McGarvey is a little below medium size, has dark hair, light hazel eyes, and a very youthful appearance for one of his age. He is very strict and regular in his habits, and this fact explains why it is that he has been able to accomplish so much mental labor without impairing his health.”10 Describing his disposition, Moore said: “He has a kind, generous nature, but is not very demonstrative. He attends strictly to his own business.”11

Some incidences in the lives of these men will show something of their character. One took place in the Missionary Society convention in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1882. Errett presided “with percussive smiles and wit” as he auctioned “life memberships and directorships” in the Society, while his assistants mingled with the audience to write down names of the buyers. A man from the crowd called out, “Can a man take life directorships for his children?” “O, yes!” replied Errett. “Certainly. We have infant memberships here.” With a placid smile beaming his face, the jovial chairman waited for the man to give his name and the number of his children. But the man answered, “All right, I simply wanted to know if you are going to make babies life directors of a Christian Missionary Society.” The smile instantly disappeared, and a confused Errett stepped from the platform. “Though he had been witty up to that time, not a joke escaped his lips during the rest of the evening.” James A. Harding was present and reported this event, which F.M. Green tried to pass off as a joke, saying Harding has made “one of the most inexcusable falsehoods.”12 However, Robert Graham, president of the College of the Bible where they held the auction, defended Harding. He said Green himself acknowledged what Harding said, but he refused to apologize. Graham also said they sold a membership to a man who not a member of the church.

Another incident took place at a Society convention. Errett again served as chairman and made a speech “in which he said he could go over the audience and pick from the fingers, wrists, ears, and bosoms of the ladies sufficient wealth to support a missionary for months, if not years.” He then proposed “that such wealth be hereafter devoted to missionary work.” The sisters were displeased with Errett’s remarks and felt they had been “personally assailed.” Not to be outdone in the matter of who should give up what for the gospel, the foxy ladies enlisted the aid of Andy Burns to offer a resolution for them. Burns said: “In behalf of the ladies of the Convention, I propose that all money spent for tobacco by the members of this Convention be henceforth devoted to the missionary cause.” Burns opposed the use of tobacco, but many brethren, including Chairman Errett, were devout supporters of the industry. No doubt they could support a missionary “for months, if not years” on money they spent for tobacco. Errett, typical of those ready to advise others as to what *they* should sacrifice for a cause, would have none of the ladies’ silly nonsense. He was not about to give up his fragrant Havanas, missionary or no missionary. In a “passionate” response, he said: “I would thank the ladies of the Convention if they would mind their own business. I’ll not entertain such a resolution.”13 But the ladies scored a point with telling effect on the Convention smokers and the chairman who dared meddle with their jewelry.

McGarvey, like most of the pioneers, believed the restored gospel would soon conquer the world and everyone would be a Christian. Not long before his death, the aged preacher stood across the street from a place where they were building a new Roman Catholic church in Latonia, Kentucky. Seeing him in deep contemplation as he watched the construction, an acquaintance approached and asked what he was thinking. McGarvey replied, “I was thinking about the day when that will be one of our churches.”14

McGarvey was so easy going and sentimental in nature that people felt free to come to him with questions or problems. There was nothing in him, as great as he was, that intimidated the poorest of saints or the worst sinners in approaching him. In his parlor he kept on display an ornamental white wax cross under a glass dome. When some visiting students wondered about it, he said there was a woman in Lexington who ran a notorious house of ill fame. She quit that evil life and became concerned for her soul. She wrote McGarvey, saying: “I am anxious to be saved, but I don’t know whether I can be or not. I am coming to hear you preach Sunday night and I want you to answer my question.” In telling about this Henry Ficklin said: “I wish I could have heard that sermon. That poor soul who afterward was redeemed was led to believe that Christ would save her. She became a Christian and gave him that ornamental cross.”15 McGarvey treasured the trinket because of the circumstances. He was that kind of man.

McGarvey possessed a sense of humor that was not often apparent in his preaching. After he began writing “Biblical Criticism,” flashes of wit sometimes crept in. This led J.H. Garrison to belittle McGarvey, saying he never manifested the qualities of a humorist until he became a Biblical critic. In reply, McGarvey denied being a Bible critic. He said: “I only aim to stand between the critics, some of whom I have had the opportunity to study, and my brethren who have not enjoyed this opportunity, that I might give them the benefit of my readings, and guard them against being misled.”15

As to his humor, McGarvey said: “... I have always been somewhat given to humor; perhaps too much so for a preacher. I have always been disposed to laugh at things which were ludicrous, and the only development in this respect of which I am conscious in connection with Biblical Criticism, is this; I find myself disposed to laugh at things which once made me angry. When I first began to read these destructive critics, I was like Elihu while listening in silence to the sophistical arguments of Job and his friends—my wrath was kindled…. But now that I see farther into the sophistries and follies of the critics, I laugh at some things which then kindled my wrath…. I must be excused, then, if I laugh at some of the ridiculous positions of the critics and their apologists.”16

**5. Their Editorial Work.** In the 1850s, Errett became an associate editor of the *Millennial Harbinger* and was a contributing editor of the *American Christian Review* in 1858. In 1866, he met with a group of men who were interested in starting a new gospel paper. The group included Gen. James A. Garfield. The meeting took place in the home of T.W. Phillips at New Castle, Pennsylvania. These men established the Christian Publishing Association and the *Christian Standard*. Errett was chosen to edit the paper and its first issue appeared April 7, 1866. It included a memorial to Alexander Campbell who had died a few weeks before. For the rest of his life, Errett’s name was associated with the *Christian Standard,* though which he exerted his greatest influence on the churches. The name of the journal was chosen because, as Errett said: “We propose to lift up the *Christian Standard*, as a rallying point for the scattered hosts of spiritual Israel; to know only ‘Jesus Christ and Him crucified’; His cross, His word, His church, His ordinances, His laws and the interests of His kingdom.”17

The *Standard* came into being because many felt that the *American Christian Review* and the *Gospel Advocate*, the leading papers among the brethren, were not satisfactory. J.S. Lamar says: “They were regarded as being narrow in their views on Scriptural truth, essentially sectarian in spirit, and, in many respects, hurtful rather than helpful to the great cause which they assumed to represent…. The great truth for whose defense the Disciples are set, demanded a wiser, sweeter, better advocacy—an advocacy that should exhibit the apostolic *spirit* as well as the *apostolic letter.*”18

After the death of Errett in 1888, the *Christian Standard* became more conservative. This perhaps explains McGarvey’s connection with it. Lipscomb had invited him to write for the *Gospel Advocate*, but he thought that paper was more extreme than he cared to be. When McGarvey began writing his “Biblical Criticism” column in the *Standard* in 1893, he had to write in a simple style because of its constituency. Apparently those who clamored for the *Standard* a quarter century before, because other papers “lacked literary merit,” had now graduated to the *Christian-Evangelist* and other more liberal papers.

After a few years, Errett became the sole owner of the *Standard.* He formed the Standard Publishing Company that became one of the largest in the religious world. He was regarded by many as the successor of Alexander Campbell. A liberal writer said of him: “The influence of his voice and pen in directing the movement inaugurated by the pioneers cannot be overestimated. The grand principles for which they contended were luminously stated and ably advocated by him; the cause was saved from the narrow, selfish and sectarian spirit that threatened its life: the great and vital interests of unity, organization, and power were preserved and mightily enlarged.”19 Errett is thus regarded as the savior of the church which many believed was drifting toward the rocks of legalism, reaction, and party factions.

McGarvey was a copious writer, but his articles largely appeared in journals edited by others. He contributed to *Lard’s Quarterly*, the *Millennial Harbinger*, and the *American Christian Review*. He was an editor of the *Apostolic Times* (1869-1885), which was started to counteract the growing popularity of the *Christian Standard*. The *Times* was edited jointly by Moses E. Lard, Robert Graham, Winthrop Hopson, L.B. Wilkes, and McGarvey. Alfred T. DeGroot says: “Their purpose was to solve the problem of innovation by taking what they assumed was a safe, middle-of-road position, accepting the missionary society but rejecting the organ.” “But,” as DeGroot further says, “the times were not propitious for halfway measures…. A case could be made for a legalistic design of the church, ‘once for all delivered to the saints,’ if one accepted the premise that the purpose of the New Testament was to reveal the specifications of unchanging modes of work and worship [the conservative view]. Without such a premise, a case could be made for new experiences in religious life and labor [the liberal view]. But there was only a diminishing constituency for those who tried to employ the spirit of literalism in Christian worship but allowed freedom in Christian work [McGarvey’s view].”20

James D. Murch said of the *Apostolic Times*: “Circulation reached a total of about one thousand before its early demise.”21 But limited though it was in circulation, it added to the burden of Errett’s work of trying, as DeGroot put it, “to rescue the church from the bondage of the unwritten traditions of the elders.”22 “As time went on, the numbers of those who advocated the middle ground steadily decreased…. When [the *Times*] died, F.G. Allen carried on with a similar policy in the *Old Path Guide*, persuading McGarvey and M.C. Kurfees to join him. In 1889, after Errett’s death, McGarvey joined the *Standard’s* staff of contributing editors, still retaining his views on instrumental music in worship and holding membership in non-instrumental churches until his death in 1911.”23

**6. Their Basic Differences in Regard to the Restoration.** To understand the respective spheres of influence of McGarvey and Errett in Restoration Movement, we must understand what was happening as the second generation of restorers came to positions of leadership. Both McGarvey and Errett were giants in the battle between the strict and loose constructions of the Restoration plea. The controversy began with the founding of the American Christian Missionary Society in 1849. In the period from then until 1866, which W.E. Garrison calls, “The Constructive Period,” the movement began to divide. One group held more to the original ground of the pioneers in reference to restoring the exact pattern of the apostolic church, while the other was moving away from what they saw as “biblical legalism.”

Garrison, in describing this conflict, says: “The Disciples taught a conception of the gospel marked by a definiteness and positiveness that gave great power to their evangelism. The defect in this virtue was that it easily ran into legalism, and this latent tendency was not long in developing. Since they knew exactly what a man must do to become a Christian, they could with equal certainty determine whether a man was a Christian by finding whether he had fulfill the requirements—faith, repentance, and baptism. It seems equally simple to determine whether a church was a true ... church of Christ by comparing its practice with the divine blueprints. Such was the attitude of the strict constructionists.”24

The next ten years (1866-1876) saw a period of controversy over “the soul of the brotherhood.” Isaac Errett was the leading influence for the loose constructionists, while McGarvey was a leading voice for the more conservative view. Although liberal, Errett was not as liberal as others and took some stands that caused them trouble. W.W. Wasson writes: “The issues over which the strict constructionists waged war were such ‘innovations’ as open communion, the use of the title ‘Reverend,’ the ‘oneman’ system of the pastorate, the use of the organ in worship, and organized missionary societies. The degree of opposition against these changes varied among the strict constructionists.”25 This point is often overlooked in interpreting the movement. While there were two definite attitudes developing among the brethren, Errett representing one and McGarvey the other, there was not then and there is not now absolute uniformity within the respective views. Errett was liberal in many things, but he was moderate, at least in the beginning, in his view on instrumental music, and he was adamant in regard to baptism for the remission of sins and its relation to Christian fellowship. McGarvey was conservative in his interpretation of the Scriptures, but he accepted the missionary society. Both men were far too complex and individualistic to put them in a neatly labeled box.

“The entire list of controversies, with no attempt to explain them on the basis of a changing social and cultural environment, expressed the differences between two attitudes toward the New Testament and its interpretation. The strict constructionists viewed the New Testament as a blueprint, giving specific instructions in regard to ‘faith, practice and discipline.’… The progressive element, on the whole, believed the New Testament to be the main source of religious authority, but they did not claim for it detailed instructions in all things regarding church organization and practice. Methods and techniques of the work and worship of the church were to be derived, according to the strict constructionist, from a ‘thus saith the Lord,’ whose voice was heard in the New Testament only; the progressives interpreted silence of the scriptures as valid authority. The difference was between those who conceived of the Campbellian movement as the restoration of a static order of Christian faith and practice and those who viewed it as a changing movement of free inquiry and experimentation in the Christian life. The strict constructionists largely characterized the former viewpoint; the progressives the latter.”26

The initial era of controversy ended in 1875 with the majority of the disciples following the progressive leadership. According to Garrison, the disciples at that time began a quarter-century “renaissance” characterized by new experiments in education, new journalistic enterprises, new missionary and benevolent organizations, a new type of evangelism, new approaches to Christian unity and cooperating, and a new discovery of the meaning of Christianity to social problems [the social gospel].From 1875 until 1900, division between the two groups was taking place and by the end of the century it became a practical reality. While sharp differences arose between the two camps and division was inevitable, it was in the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries that the majority progressive element made a sharp turn toward denominat-ionalism that would eventually divide the liberal branch of the movement. Erret’s death occurred before the more theological elements took control of the Missionary Society and much of the Christian Church. Although he was liberal by the standards of the strict-constructionist and loose-constructionists controversy of the post Civil War era, he was not as liberal as those who came after him. We might best describe him as a liberal-conservative.

**Conclusion.** Both J.W. McGarvey and Isaac Errett had a tremendous influence on the Restoration Movement.Errett paved the way for the liberalism that eventually led most of the disciples to abandon the original principles of the Restoration for a looser view. John Clifton Trimble, in his doctoral thesis on McGarvey, writes: “For nearly half a century McGarvey was, perhaps, the most noted figure among the Disciples of Christ. As professor and then later president of the College of the Bible ... his fame spread across international boundaries.”27 It was in connection with the College of the Bible that McGarvey did his most effective teaching. The school’s primary purpose was to train preachers. Leroy Garrett correctly connects the liberal movement in the Restoration, of which Isaac Errett was a part, to the abandonment of the teaching and influence of McGarvey.

**Notes**

1 Moore, W.T. *The Living Pulpit of the Christian Church.*

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Hoffman, G.A., Frank W. Allen, and J.W. Higbee, ex. com. *The Missouri Christian Lectures.*

6 Ibid.

7 Moore. *Living Pulpit*.

8 *Lard’s Quarterly*, April 1865.

9 Moore. *Living Pulpit.*

10.Ibid.

11.Ibid.

12 Wallace, William, comp. *Daniel Sommer, 1850-1940, A Biography*.

13 Ibid.

14 Morro, W.C. *Brother McGarvey.*

15 Ibid.

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17 Murch, James D. *Christians Only*.

18 Lamar, J.S. *Memoirs f Isaac Errett*.

19 Wde, John W. *Pioneers of the Restoration Movement*.

20 Garrison, W.T., and Alfred T. DeGroot. *The Disciples of Christ—a History.*

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22 Ibid.

. 23 Ibid.

24 Garrison, W.E. *Religion Follows the Frontier.*

25 Wasson, W.W. *James A. Garfield: His Religion and Education*.

26Ibid.

27 Trimble, John Clifton. *The Rhetorical Theory and Practice of John W. McGarvey,*

Earl Kimbrough, Annandale, Virginia. Nov. 1997.