**Editors’ Approach: The Influence**

**Of Editors On The Brotherhood**

An *editor*, as the term is used here, is one *in charge* of a periodical. He sets the policy, selects the writers, controls the content, and expresses opinions. If he owns the paper, his control of it is absolute; but if it is owned by others, he follows guidelines set by them or is permitted free reign as editor. From the time that men began to edit and publish religious journals in the early years of the Restoration of apostolic Christianity, editors have been prominent in every branch and region of the movement.

The *brotherhood* is comprised of all Christians. Everyone who has obeyed the gospel and been added to the church is included. Peter said: “Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.” (1 Pet. 2:17.) He used “the brotherhood” to mean all of God’s children. We are to love all who are of the “household of faith,” holding them with a brotherly affection that exceeds the love we have for all others. Since we cannot more narrowly circumscribe the church, we must regard “the brotherhood” as all-inclusive. However, the word is often used accumulatively to signify brethren with whom we are in fellowship. In this sense, an editor’s influence on “the brotherhood” is in reality his influence on a limited portion of the brotherhood.

So in considering the *influence* of editors on *the brotherhood*, we naturally limit the word to those brethren within the range of an editor’s readership. No editor, except perhaps Alexander Campbell, has had an influence on anything near the whole brotherhood. The Dictionary says “influence,” in reference to people, is “the power or ability to affect someone’s beliefs or actions.” The influence of an able editor is usually broader than his editorial power. That which makes him an effective editor is rarely limited to the editorial page. But we are thinking primarily of an editor’s influence that is affected through his position *as an editor*.

In reference to divine truth, an editor’s influence can be little or great, and it can be good or bad, or a mixture of both, depending on the circumstances. His influence is best measured by history. It is often difficult to fully determine the power of an editor in his lifetime. It is a mistake to think an editor has power to effect the beliefs and actions of people simply because of his position. For each editor who carries much weight in the “brotherhood,” there are probably several whose influence is hardly worth weighing.

More than 150 Restoration journals were started between the Civil War and 1900. Some sixty of these lasted only a year and another sixty died in two to five years. About a dozen lived for more than twenty years and only about half of those had a substantial influence. Even journals that had a longer life often underwent mergers, name revisions, and changes in owners and editors. Each major alteration practically made one a different paper. The *American Christian Review* was not the paper under John F. Rowe or Daniel Sommer that it was under Benjamin Franklin. F.B. Srygley often scoffed at Sommer’s claim that his paper was founded by Benjamin Franklin.

Longevity itself is not a true measure of an editor’s influence. *Lard’s Quarterly* lasted less than five years, yet James D. Murch considered it one of four journals with “wide influence” up to about the time of the Civil War; the others being the *Millennial Harbinger*, the *American Christian Review,* and the *Gospel Advocate.* Undoubtedly, the most influential editor in the nineteenth century was Alexander Campbell as editor of the *Christian Baptist.* In the seven years of that journal, hewas probably the most influential editor in Restoration history. He not only wielded a tremendous influence at the time, but his influence continued through D.S. Burnet’s “Seven Volumes in One” version of that journal. From 1835 to 1889, it went through fifteen editions.

An editor’s *approach* is important because it is this that mainly determines the strength of his influence. The word denotes a way of dealing with something, or in verbal form, to “treat something in a particular way.” There seems to be five essential factors in an editor’s influence.

(1) He has a *particular purpose* or *approach* in editing his journal. This may be stated or implied, or determined from what he says. The purpose of R.H. Boll in taking the editorship of *Word and Work* in 1916 was to advance premillennialism within the framework of apostolic Christianity. Austin McGary began the *Firm Foundation* to support his view of what a person must know when he is baptized. Naturally, it was not limited to that topic, but that was a featured item. Alexander Campbell’s approach in editing the *Christian Baptist* is clearly stated, negatively and positively. He said it “shall espouse the cause of no religious sect, excepting that ancient sect ‘called Christians first at Antioch.’ Its sole object shall be the eviction of truth, and the exposure of error in doctrine and practice. The editor acknowledging no standard or religious faith or work, other than the Old And New Testaments, and the latter as the only standard of the religion of Jesus Christ, will, intentionally at least, oppose nothing which it contains and recommend nothing which it does not enjoin … he hopes to manifest that he is an impartial advocate of truth.”1

The reason the Christian Publishing Association began the *Christian Standard* in 1866 was to “take the place of the declining *Millennial Harbinger* and counter [as James Murch expressed it] the baneful influences of some reactionary and legalistic deter-minism.”2 However, few could question the *stated* purpose of that journal. “We propose to lift 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.”3

(2) An editor’s influence is determined in part by *his character.* Elias Smith, publisher of the first religious journal in America, had a limited influence because of his unstable character, swinging from one doctrine to another. Whereas Barton W. Stone, although speculative in some aspects of his ministry, was a man of noble character who maintained an unshakable approach for the unity of Christians based on the word of God. His influence was aided by his kindly disposition in dealing with error. The churches of Christ in North Alabama developed primarily under Stone’s influence and thus became somewhat unique in their disposition. There was not the bitter division that occurred in other states over innovations. O.P. Spiegel, one of the few Mars’ Hill College graduates who sided with the “progresssives,” said there was no division of churches in the state, but that each group just drifted apart one from the other without ranker and that fellowship between the two groups just gradually ceased.

(3) Another element in the influence of an editor is *the temperament of his readers*. Campbell and Stone were influential editors because they appealed to people who were tired of sectarian bickering and schism. F.B. Srygley believed that the influence of David Lipscomb was not so much his stand for truth or his persuasive power, as it was that the rural churches, among which were most of his readers, were in sympathy with his views. In other words, he was influential because the people who read his editorials largely agreed with him. There are exceptions, but as a rule, people flock to a paper because they tend to side with the editor, and they read his paper for encouragement, sympathy, and support in their faith. People read papers much like they attend debates: to be bolstered own thinking.

(4) Another factor in the influence of an editor on his readers is his ability *to reach an audience* with his message. H. Leo Boles understood that the influence of the *Gospel Advocate* rested at the time on the editorship of David Lipscomb and E.G. Sewell. He said: “The writer would not, even if he could, detract in the least from the honor and glory that belong to Brethren Lipscomb and Sewell in doing so much good through the Advocate, but they could not have done what they did do had it not been for J.C. McQuiddy, who increased the circulation of the paper and managed it in such a way as to enable Lipscomb and Sewell to instruct the brotherhood through the Advocate.” “It was largely through Brother McQuiddy’s management that the Gospel Advocate wielded such a powerful influence in the South.”4

(5) An editor’s influence is affected by *the temper of the times*. If a man like Campbell should begin a paper today comparable to the *Christian Baptist*, how much influence would he have? T.B. Larimore, one of the greatest evangelists of modern times, failed as an editor. He published a little eight page paper called, *The Angel of Mercy, Love, Peace and Truth*. Its press run was about 5,000 copies per issue. But it only lasted two years and never attracted enough subscribers to pay the postage. It was distributed freely to those unable or unwilling to pay for it. The paper may have succeeded in another era, but brethren in the late 1800s did not care for a paper that was all “sweetness.” Most wanted a paper with teeth in it. The *Millennial Harbinger* declined in its latter years due in part to the loss of its bark. At the same time, the *Gospel Advocate*, the *American Christian Review*, and *Lard’s Quarterly,* not only carried a bark, but they sought to continue the primary Restoration ideals advanced by Campbell in the *Christian Baptist*.

The *Christian Standard* almost failed at first for lack of readers. Its great loss moved its board to give it to the editor, Isaac Errett, lock, stock, and press. But by the end of Errett’s life, twenty-two years later, the *Standard* was the most widely read paper among “the brotherhood.” This was not due to Errett’s influence, although he was one of the best of the Restoration editors, but because the attitude of brethren toward the Restoration ideal had shifted decidedly to the left, and Errett knew how to satisfy the brethren who turned to the *Standard* for comfort.

J.W. McGarvey and others who occupied a middle-of-the-road position in the brotherhood, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, met scant success as editors because there was little market for their product. Murch writes: “In 1869 the *Apostolic Times* appeared to counteract the growing popularity of the [*Christian*] *Standard.* It was edited by Moses E. Lard, Robert Graham, Winthrop Hopson, Lanceford B. Wilkes, and John W. McGarvey. This was truly a formidable array of talent. There was not a stain upon the reputation of one of them. Circumstances brought them together in the Lexington [Kentucky] area where each held places of distinction among the churches and in the university.”5

If there was ever a paper that should have had a strong influence on “the brotherhood,” it was surely the *Apostolic Times.* Considering the ability and character of its editors, it seems that success would have been guaranteed. It was, in their words, dedicated “to the primitive faith, and the primitive practice, without enlargement or diminution, without innovation or modification.” Murch says the editors were so certain they would destroy “the Cincinnati dragon that they so announced on many occasions.” They further said that “no such array of talent had ever been brought together in one periodical and that their influence alone would assure the largest subscription list in the brotherhood.” But then reality set in! “Circulation reached a total of about one thousand before its early demise.”6 This shows that dynamics other than the genius, skill, integrity, and approach must be weighed when an editor’s influence is considered.

While in college, I became acquainted with the *Bible Banner*. President L.R. Wilson made available to the students his personal back issues of that journal and I read them thoroughly, imbibing something of their spirit and message. I was greatly influenced by the work of the editor, but I was already turned in the non-institutional direction through the teaching I receive for nearly four years at the feet of George DeHoff, who later counted the cost and changed his views. I doubt that Wallace would have had a great influence on me if I had not already been in sympathy with his teaching.

From the 1924 through the division over institutionalism in the 1950s, the *Gospel Advocate* was controlled by Leon McQuiddy, a son of J.C. McQuiddy. He fired James A. Allen as editor the paper in 1930 and immediately replaced him with Foy E. Wallace, Jr., then an able young preacher with great pulpit skill, but with no appreciable editorial experience. When Wallace resigned in 1934 due to personal financial problems, McQuiddy immediately hired John T. Hinds to take his place, but when Hinds suddenly died in 1938, McQuiddy took a year to find his replacement. Allen, Wallace, and Hinds were conservative in their editorial practice and continued the open policy that the paper maintained in the dark days when division left the churches of Christ a small minority of the Restoration brotherhood. Many at that time rallied around the “Old Faithful” because of its “ring of soundness,” the figure N.B. Hardeman took from the railroad inspector striking the wheels of the train to see if they reverberated with soundness.

But even in the 1930s, some *Advocate* pages no longer carried the solid ring of soundness they had carried before. A few writers opposed the paper’s opposition to premillennialism and sought to weaken its voice against the work of R.H. Boll. F.B. Srygley’s last days saw a relentless battle on his part against premillennialism, which was softening some brethren toward this error, and against institutionalism, which was then developing among the churches of Christ. He was once asked why the many preachers that were congregated in Nashville did not spread out to evangelize destitute places. He replied: “That cannot be done, because, with the institutions we have now in and around Nashville … as Christ said of the poor, we will always have them with us.’7

When B.C. Goodpasture finally became editor of the *Advocate*, a board of twelve men was chosen to oversee the paper, set its policy, and guide its affairs. But Good-pasture was such a skilled editor bishop almost from the first that the board, after an appearance in Goodpasture’s maiden issue, was never heard from again. Further, the board’s initial policy statement was self-contradictory and self-destructive. While it promised to continue the open policy that had characterized the *Advocate* in the past, it also gave the editor power over the content of the paper and the right to close a discussion at will. Goodpasture fully agreed with the board’s policy. Why should he not? It gave him complete power over the content of the journal. The power to end a controversy at will is the power to will it stopped before it starts. Within a few years, many were saying: “The Gospel Advocate is not what it used to be.” They were not talking about its appearance, but about its content.

In my way of thinking, it was not so much Goodpasture’s influence that led many churches and preachers to adopt institutionalism, as it was that brethren found in him the leader they had been waiting for. The man and the hour had met! Goodpasture very ably used his position to shut out all anti-institutional voices in the only paper that many of the brethren read. The void was gradually filled by others who were in sympathy with the direction the editor wanted the churches to take. There are two things that have a great effect on some brethren: money and power. Goodpasture’s use of his editorial influence in regard to both of these elements was able to move some influential men who once opposed institutionalism to join the institutional majority among the churches of Christ.

Benjamin Franklin’s opposition to digression cost him dearly. Many former friends became his bitter enemies and he became the focus of their attack on what they called “old foggyism.” For a man who loved unity, who edited the most widely read journal among the brethren at the time, and who was probably the most popular preacher since Alexander Campbell, the castigation must have been especially painful. Editors of less integrity might very well have checked their depleting wallets and declining status among brethren, reflected in a loss of subscriptions, and decided to abruptly change course. Only one of deep conviction and character could have weathered, with resolution and integrity, the swelling storm of controversy and division that surrounded Franklin.

John F. Rowe tried to follow Franklin’s steps, but few strongly guided journals carry the same weight when they change editors. An acrimonious conflict arose between Rowe and Errett, likely stemming from Errett’s ungracious exclusion of Rowe from the *Christian Standard’s* pages a dozen years earlier. A blistering warfare ensued that only the strong hearted care to review. Errett was the shrewder strategist, and Rowe lost considerable prestige among opponents of innovations. “Coming as it did in that critical time when many were on the fence respecting the innovations, Errett won a singular victory.”8

Why did some editors became so powerful? Or did they? We have often quoted W.T. Moore’s comment about “editor-bishops.” There is no doubt that some editors gained power that in some ways they used in imitation of high-handed bishops. And there is no doubt that some of them have abused their power. Few men with power will fail to exercise it when they feel that it is needed, or when they feel themselves threatened. Those editors who became influential did so because they supplied a need, were trusted by their subscribers, were persuasive in their presentation, dealt with issues in a manner that satisfied their readers, and were adept in obtaining a wide following. They became popular with a substantial number of brethren for the same reason that some preachers are in greater demand than others: brethren are pleased with their work.

Editor Yater Tant supplied one element of the *Christian Standard’s* success that is not generally stressed by historians. “The decisive factor in fastening the missionary society around the neck of the church like an albatross was the founding and growth of a paper which adopted a ‘closed door’ policy in its columns, refusing to permit its readers to see ‘both sides’ of the missionary society and the instrumental music controversies…. I do not say that the policy … was the sole cause of this tragedy, of course…. But I do say, and it cannot be denied, that the ‘closed door’ policy of this powerful religious journal was one of the biggest contributing forces operating toward division. Indeed, it may well have been the most potent single influence in that direction”9 If one sees a likeness in the *Standard’s* closed door policy to that of another journal a hundred years later, it may be that both were cut from the same pattern.

In conclusion, I would like to summarize the influence of some of the leading editors over the past two hundred years. First, there have been relatively few editors during the course of the Restoration Movement who have risen to the level of Moore’s “editor-bishops.” All have no doubt had some influence, but the kind of influence referred to here is that which has had a profound effect on the direction of a sizeable portion of the movement, or has decidedly affected a stand for the “old paths” at a critical period. However, to the mortification of some would be editor bishops, there has never been an editor universally accepted by the brotherhood. For that reason we, fortunately, have never developed an “editor-pope,” although some may have sought such an office.

At least from the first generation of restorers, when editing fever became a contagious and incurable disease among preachers, there has been both a constant renewal of the supply of editors and a progressive decline in their editorial influence. In the beginning, a few editors—notably men like Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, Walter Scott, and Tolbert Fanning—had a great influence among their brethren. But after the Civil War and up until the early decades of the twentieth century, as a division was taking place among the churches over innovations, some editors had a strong influence for one position or another—liberal, conservative, or in-between—but to a large extent they were “preaching to the choir” so to speak.

Through the balance of the nineteenth century and up until the present, the influence of editors has continued to steadily erode. Not all subscribers read the papers they take and not all readers are especially influenced by what they read. Editors who are unaware of this trend, but yet try to be “editor-bishops,” find themselves, as one astute brother expressed it to me some years ago, “becoming stronger and stronger with fewer and fewer.” Some editors, aware of their dwindling influence, have suddenly realized that their herd is leaving them and have chosen to change horses in the middle of the stream, to mix some metaphors.

We discussed the declining influence of editors with three preachers who are knowledgeable in Restoration history, and they agree that there has been a steady decrease in editorial influence on the brotherhood. Terry E. Gardner said: “My view is that [the power of editors] begins to decline with the advent of radio. TV is really the death blow to their influence. By the mid-1950s they were largely papers for and by preachers and fewer and fewer members read them.”10

Whether the demise of influential editors proves to be a blessing or a curse to the brotherhood, future historians may sort out for a preachers’ seminar, say in the year 2030. But present experience indicates that it is hard to get some brethren to read the church bulletin even when their name is in it. Many fine journals placed in the foyer of the meetinghouse are left there to collect the holy dust of the synagogue. But some may be better at collecting dust than attracting readers.

**Notes.**

1*Christian Baptist,* July 1823.

2James D. Murch, *Christians Only*.

3Ibid.

4H. Leo Boles, *Biographical Sketches of Gospel Preachers*.

5Murch, *Christians*.

6Ibid.

7*Gospel Advocate*, Sept. 17, 1936.

8Earl West*, Search* *for the Ancient Order*.

9*Gospel Guardian*, Jan. 3, 1963.

10Terry E. Gardner, Letter to Earl Kimbrough, Oct. 24, 2006.

Earl Kimbrough, 2006.