
REMINISCENSES
—OF—
SIXTY YEARS OF PRESBYTERIANISM
IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA,
—BY—
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—BY—

Rev. RICHARD LEA, D. D.

RETIRING MODERATOR.

Psalm 44:1. "We have heard with our ears, O God. Our Fathers have told us, what work thou didst in their days, in the times of old."

Often have I been asked, what changes have you noticed in the people and churches during the fifty years of your active ministry and the ten previous years of your preparation, particularly in Western Pennsylvania. Sixty years ago the first class of ministers, called the *Fathers*, were mostly laid aside from their pastorates, but what remained were highly venerated for their former labors among hardy settlers, who battled with the Indians and reared their log churches in the wilderness. The Eastern churches were divided from them by the Alleghenies. The West was just settling. No "Boards" existed, traveling difficult, money scarce, everything tended to form an independent race, who "trusted God and kept their powder dry." Few "Sabbath schools;" very few "prayer meetings;" no such things as "Conventions." The family altars burned brightly. The catechisms were taught to the children. The church was filled. Communion, held by united congregations in the woods, and the Presbyteries were always *Powers*, often *Bethels*. Books were *few*. Religious *Papers*, *none*. Pastors were expected

to have the "five points" of doctrine in their morning prayer, to extemporize two sermons, explain the psalm, avoid hymns and manuscripts, must visit the sick, preach funeral sermons, and were always welcomed at "Log Rollings," made Captains at the "husking frolic," partook of the best bed, the best food, and the best whisky their parishioners could afford. In those times, this leadership, repressed wrong, gave the preachers many opportunities of usefulness which they very generally improved. The country churches were numerous, and for a long time supplied the log church in Pittsburgh with the preaching of the word, as supplies of the Presbytery of Redstone. In the "Whisky Insurrection" the ministers "fenced the Lord's table against the insurgents. Father Porter hardly ever failed to attend "Court week" at Greensburg, to literally separate combatants, and with a few friends preserve order in the streets. The stone house yet stands, near Congruity Church, which when built was to be opened with a grand "house warming," which nearly always meant whisky and dancing. Porter gave it out from the pulpit, was present early, opened it with prayer, and gave such an address that dancing is separated from church membership there to this day. The meetings of Presbytery were attended by entire congregations; hours and days were spent in devotional exercises. Several prominent foreign ministers were lost to the body, who insisted upon careful examination upon piety and orthodoxy, valuing this right perhaps more than the most orderly credentials. Young candidates would dread their examinations in open Presbytery before all the people, who deeply sympathized with and prayed for them during the trial. *Omission, curtailing, hurry* would have been considered irreverent. The preachers held to the literal interpretation of the Bible. Creation was God's word, spoken about six thousand years ago. Man was not with these fathers ever a molecule, or monkey. The fall was not a myth. Job's trials were real. Dives upon the Saviour's canvas, and those terrible words,

“weeping,” “wailing,” “gnashing of teeth,” the worm which *never dieth*, the fire which shall never be quenched, the impassible gulf, and the vengeance of *eternal fire* did not mean *conscience* only, or some punishment ending with more or less speed. I know of one brother minister yet preaching, who, when a boy, was converted, as hundreds of others were, through the terrible realistic preaching of Dr. McMillan. “The *Law* was a school-master leading to Christ.” After some of these sermons at the “Tent” the woods would resound until late at night with groans and cries for mercy. The next day the silver-tongued Marquis would speak of Heavenly joy, and Patterson beseech the sinner to be reconciled to Christ.

Camp meetings, including preaching, praying, exhortation and communion, were held. One large tent, plenty of wagons loaded with provisions. Nothing for sale. No visitors around the ground. At night farm houses and barns accommodated the people. During the “falling time” women cared for unconscious women; men for men. They were carried to their own families and friends. Physicians were rarely called. The preachers did not oppose or favor the “falling,” but generally recognized it as the work of God, when it occurred. Many “fell” and awoke *unconverted*, perhaps more were permanently affected. An aged lady said to me: “McCurdy’s voice pierced my soul. I thought I was deservedly sinking into hell. Then the Saviour pardoned me. I awoke among my friends without knowing how I came there.” In 1810 this “falling” had almost entirely ceased among Presbyterians. I never heard McMillan’s law thunder, but did hear him *twice* describe the bride and her beloved, both times from Solomon’s song. He and Ralston and Jennings and others were educated men, but the West settled too fast to be supplied from the East, and must look out for itself in the supply of ministers.

The “Old Log College” at Canonsburg has often been spoken of. Other schools too arose to bless. Let us get at the fountain

if we can. It would come to the knowledge of Presbytery that a waggoner, one *McCurdy*, was possessed of talent and piety, one of the Elders likely would suggest to him to borrow books and recite to the minister, who would also call upon him to pray and exhort, and by and by introduce him to Presbytery for examination. The Indians have besieged Fort Montours, Elder Patterson comforts the women and the wounded, holds worship almost daily. He has a family and is advanced in life, but never mind he proves himself worthy, and thinks, with others, that his friends, Marquis and Porter, might also study when work was slack. There is, too, an Englishman in the Second Church, Pittsburgh, who prays in public, helps his pastor visit, so Thomas Davis is brought forward. Such men made their mark. God called them, the people recognized them, the Presbytery ordained them. But this is not the fountain. A mother thinks that her boy is extraordinary. He is "so wise," "such a reader," "prays in secret," "loves the church." "How I have prayed that that boy would become a preacher." "His brothers will do double work if he goes to the *learning*." "His father will pay his schooling." "His sisters will clothe him." The Pastor and Elders say, send him! Everybody who knows him says, send him. Soon the duty of the Presbytery is clear. The boy goes, teaches in vacation, some rich farmer will give him a suit for examination, the Doctor will give him access to his library, very quietly his sweetheart tells him "that his performances are wonderful." What cares he for toils and late hours, or jeers on account of economy! He grows thin, pale, sometimes has to stop a little, but he wins, oftentimes college honors. God has called him, and the people soon open their pulpit, with a cordial invitation for him to enter.

Patterson was licensed as follows: Starting to Presbytery he said to his wife: My dear, I expect to preach my trial sermon at such an hour. Lay aside all work, and spend that hour in prayer for my success. The hour arrived. Presby-

tery took up some other business instead, and Patterson desponded of his wife's aid. On the morrow he preached with wonderful freedom, and his sermon accepted. Arriving home, his wife said: You did not preach yesterday, but to-day! How do you know? "Why, yesterday I could not pray for you with any zeal, but to-day I poured out my whole soul, feeling that I was aiding you." Once he was in a great strait for a sum of money, prayed for it as he did for everything. He went out carrying his gun. A large wolf came near. He shot it, sold the *scalp*, which would bring half as much as an Indian's. A negative cannot well be proved, but I never heard of a preacher shooting an Indian. Porter used to "fix his flint" before he began to preach, when the savages were about.

But in sixty years, Presbyteries became Synods, and a grand difficulty appears, how to accommodate the thousands of Israel in council. With all our churches and seminaries and boards, preachers, elders and organizations of women and young men, the difficulty appears to be, how to reach the masses. We have far more learning, far more money, far more facilities for labor than our fathers. Why do we not succeed? Succeed in what? You do not suppose that we can convert men? No, but bring them out to hear. Perhaps you can draw a crowd, by proving that the Mosaic account of the creation is consistent with the theory that the world has passed through stages of *ice, fire, gigantic vegetation*. That the rocks were formed of grains, these grains of *molecules*. Nature so far. Then admit that God created the *molecules*, and make it more interesting to the hearers by guessing how many he made at a time! How many millions of ages he employed in creating all of them before nature commenced the aggregation. Many deeply interesting subjects might be discussed to collect people, but *cui bono?*

I would rather say that the last sixty years have been to me one grand hallelujah! I first loved the few fathers who

remained for their fearless preaching of the whole truth, and when they left the Church watched with admiration, sometimes with awe, never with fear of her grand progress. In my view her career has been steadily onward. "The Act and Testimony" Convention was the grandest body of men I had ever seen. Then followed the division into Old and New School, establishing the right and the ability and the duty of the Church to do her own work, foreign and domestic. Then the fraternal embrace of the two parties—too good to be separate, the union of which added such power to our movements in this region.

See the Seminary rising slowly, but surely. Once, three Godly men were mourning over the low estate of this institution. One exclaimed, we have no Friends. Yes! replied Father Patterson, there are a thousand in this room. You, Dr. Swift, are a cypher. Dr. Herron is a cypher. I am a cypher. Three cyphers. Christ is here. He is *one*. Put *one* before *three cyphers* and we have a *thousand*. Dr. Herron died, but Dr. Beattie was raised up. The Seminary lives. We have had *three* Grand Conventions. The first had some of the Fathers present, and discussed the benevolences of the Church. The second had brilliant speakers, Drs. Green and Plummer. The third eminent for fervent prayer and short addresses. All invoking the Spirits' aid. All willing to do or die for Jesus. Sixty years ago I did not know six young men who would have prayed in public. Now hundreds will lead a meeting. Mary's have multiplied a hundred fold; Martha's a thousand fold. In April last fifty-two ministers gave in the reports of churches, covering but a fragment of the space of former years. While all beyond, instead of being a wilderness, is as the garden of the Lord. Look around Grant's Hill. Look where Braddock died. Look at Allegheny, once bloody ground. Do you need now Fort Redstone, and Pitt, and Raccoon, and Hanna's Town, and a hundred block houses, many of which were standing sixty years ago? How many bells call the

worshippers to God's house? How many thousands are there in our Sabbath schools? How many prayer meetings daily, nightly, weekly, are there? What is the religious press doing? How much more money could the Church now raise in one collection than the Fathers ever saw? Hallelujah! God formed every molecule of this Western Church in a little over a century, and constructed the edifice so far without pausing. We *advanced* even when we wept. What will sixty years more accomplish?

DIFFERENCES OR CHANGES.

1. Perhaps the Fathers were tedious sometimes in their public services? Certainly. We are nearly always too much in a hurry.

2. Presbyteries were hailed in their meetings by the people as great occasions. Now they are almost forsaken, except on special services.

3. Perhaps they "fenced" the Lord's Table somewhat strictly. Many times we are almost careless in session and on the solemn occasion. They had a previous fast day (Thursday) services on Friday, Saturday and Monday. We are almost entirely indebted to the *babies* for the preservation of worship on Saturday afternoons. Have the men of the City Churches more important business? In Country Churches *baptism* and the congregational business has so far rescued Monday morning.

4. In "olden time" many Elders would decline to lead in public prayer. This is most wonderfully remedied. I have heard not only men, but women and young girls pray openly before the saloon, while, for a brief space, the drinking and blasphemy inside ceased. Non-communicants often engage in public prayer.

5. Young Men's Christian Associations and Women's Societies for every good thing have increased marvellously.

6. Now you can use the *name* of Jesus in praise, and "Praise God with the sound of the trumpet, on the lute and harp, on strings and pipes," according to the command of David in the Psalms.

7. Our Fathers assembled and reared with their own hands an humble house of worship. We are often told "That religion cannot succeed in new places except our house of God is as good as that of rival sects." Sometimes it is appalling how recklessly we go into debt.

8. When the Fathers needed aid, pleas in *public* would be made in the churches for *glass, nails, sympathy, &c.* Now *Boards* ask for consideration, also, for ecclesiastical command. Roll calling to discover disobedience and obedience.

9. Our Fathers nobly fought for liberty to worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience. Laid foundations broad and deep in this land. Did not forget the Indian tribes. In our Pittsburgh began our own organized effort to send the Gospel to every creature.

When we look at our seminaries, and colleges, and churches and vast enterprises hardly a century old, and remember that the *material* is the child of *immaterial*, that *works* are the product of *faith*, we may imagine how those who preceded us prayed and believed and loved. And how God's spirit moved our fathers and mothers. Our Father's arms were around them always. He led them on. Now we hear Jesus say, Go! to every creature. Never mind the babel of tongues and the roaring sea, and the fire and the sneer. "Lo! I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." Amen!

DANGERS.

1. Do not some parents permit the grand Sabbath school to interfere with home training?

2. Has not private fireside conversation upon heart religion given place somewhat to criticisms of men and sermons?

3. Are we not in danger of undervaluing humble Church members and overestimating the rich, talented, and those possessing social influence?

4. Do not our brightest and best sometimes forsake their own Church work for various outside efforts, and then berate their forsaken *alma mater* for not falling in immediately with their peculiar ideas?

Do not permit these questions to give the idea that we would willingly spare any good work. But Christ *first*, our own organized Presbyterian Church *second*. Then the right hand of fellowship to every good thing without our pale.