

LOVE FOR OUR HERITAGE

By Victor Knowles

*“The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places;
Indeed, my heritage is beautiful to me”* (Psalm 16:6 NASB).

What is heritage? Several synonyms swiftly come to mind: tradition, inheritance, legacy, or birthright. Heritage, therefore, is something handed down from one’s ancestor (or the past) as a characteristic, culture, or tradition.

What thou lov’st well remains, the rest is dross
What thou lov’st well shall not be reft (taken, torn) from thee
What thou lov’st well is thy true heritage
Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

God’s heritage was Israel. He told Moses, “I will bring you into the land which I swore [with an uplifted hand – NIV] to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you as a heritage” (Exod 6:8). He “gave the land as a heritage, a heritage to Israel His people” (Ps 135:12). God said He would judge harshly the nations that took Israel His heritage captive, calling them “My people, My heritage Israel” (Joel 3:2).

God has a heritage and so do we. Our heritage is what has been handed down to us by our spiritual ancestors. Psalm 145:4 says, “One generation will commend your works to another.” Psalm 78:3, 4 says, “What we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us, we will not hide them from their children; **we will tell the next generation...**”

CAMPBELL’S CANE

Several years ago I received a wonderful gift. It was a Blackthorn walking stick once owned by Alexander Campbell. A man in Michigan who thought I might like to have it sent it to me. Along with the well-worn, brass-tipped cane he sent some documentation. “This cane belonged to Alexander Campbell, founder of the Church of Christ, and was used by him when he was imprisoned in Glasgow, Scotland. Samuel Beach, your grandfather, traveled as a singer with Alexander Campbell, and on one of these tours, he and Campbell exchanged canes.” While most of my listeners/readers would quickly and rightly protest that Campbell was “the founder of the Church of Christ,” all would agree that the walking stick is a nice part of our religious heritage.

All it takes is the failure of one generation to tell the next generation about their good heritage – their godly heritage that they “love well” – and that great inheritance is lost, perhaps forever. In our text David was grateful for his good heritage. The New King James Version says, “I have a good inheritance.” The New International Version calls it a “delightful inheritance.” The Bible in Basic English reads, “I have a noble heritage.”

DESPISING OUR BIRTHRIGHT

Several years ago I was asked by *Christian Standard* to write an article on how “we” should view “us” – “we” and “us” being the noble heirs of the Restoration Movement. I chose Psalm 16:6 as my springboard for discussion. Remember that a heritage is a birthright. Right or wrong, this is what I wrote.

“Esau sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. Why would anyone unload his birthright for a bowl of beans? What a bad trade! Selling your inheritance for stew. Why would anyone do such a foolish thing? The biblical record gives us a clue: ‘Esau despised his birthright’ (Gen 25:34). Because of his low regard for his good heritage, Esau exchanged his birthright for fast food [or as a worker at Kenny Rogers Chicken told Jerry Seinfeld, ‘Not fast food, Jerry – good food prepared quickly.’]. It was not long until he realized what a foolish thing he had done. He tearfully sought the bartered blessing – but it was too late (Heb 12:16,17).

“The heritage of conservative Christian churches and churches of Christ is a good one. It is not a perfect heritage – none are – but it is a pleasant heritage. It is my heritage, and I can no more turn my back on it than I could disown my own family heritage. We are a part of a noble tradition to return to the Bible. Boiled down to its bare essence this movement stands for the preeminence of Christ, the authority of the Bible, and the unity of all believers. Christ is our only creed. Scripture is our only guide. Unity is the means by which the world will be won to Christ.” **This we will tell the next generation!**

“HISTORICAL AMNESIA”

Today we have some in this noble movement who seem to suffer from “historical amnesia.” Some want to revise our history and others would deny it altogether. Some are embarrassed because of our divisions – as if we were the only church body that ever divided over issues and opinions! Others try to airbrush 200 years of documented history and blithely say, “Oh, we are just Christians and don’t really have a record of religious history like other religious groups.” That would be akin to saying Ozark Christian College or Pepperdine University did not have a beginning or got to where they are today without sacrifice and struggle. When we act as though we got here by accident or

without incident we do a grave injustice to courageous men like Campbell and Stone and Scott who left their denominations to take the Bible only and say, “Let us be Christians only!” Our heritage is not a perfect one but it is a good one, a noble one, yes, even a beautiful heritage and let no man or woman here today ever deny their heritage or despise their birthright.

Israel started down a long and tortured path when Joshua died and a generation after Joshua arose not knowing the Lord or the work he had done for them in the past (Judg 2:10). Somebody didn’t “love well.” Somebody didn’t treasure his godly inheritance. Somebody despised his birthright. Somebody did not pass down to their children their heritage. And the book of Judges ends with these words: “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” That’s how you go from noble heritage to ignoble relativism.

Christian Churches and Churches of Christ have a noble heritage. I love our shared heritage in the Restoration Movement because we both:

- Seek to worship God in spirit and in truth,
- Have come to Christ via the same route (faith, repentance, confession, and baptism),
- Are brothers in Christ in the same brotherhood (God has but one and He says, “Love it!),
- Believe in being a New Testament church,
- Have the same Holy Spirit dwelling within us,
- Preach same message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified,
- Love and practice the Great Commission.

This we will tell the next generation!

THE GREATEST TRAGEDY

On a purely personal note, I love our shared heritage because 40 years ago I married one of the finest ladies the churches of Christ ever had to offer. The Bible says, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” When people ask, “Is unity with our church of Christ brethren really possible?” I just point them to Evelyn and say, “Behold, the woman!”

My heroes and best friends are from churches of Christ. When I was in college I learned about Marshall Keeble (a great black preacher), N. B. Hardeman, and Batsell Barrett Baxter. I bought an LP record of Keeble’s sermons (that’s a big round CD to most of you students). I read Hardeman’s sermons in *The Voice of Evangelism*. BBB was a great preacher on NBC for the Herald of Truth. I listened to V. E. Howard on the International Gospel Hour (“Are you listening?”). I read the writings of W. Carl Ketcherside and Leroy Garrett; two finer penmen and peacemakers never lived. I watched Don DeWalt and Bill Humble work together in shared projects. I have the utmost

respect for men like Claude Witty, Ernest Beam, and Reuel Lemmons – all gone to glory.

This Restoration Forum has created some of my closet friendships on earth with brothers from churches of Christ. They include Monroe Hawley, Furman Kearley, Marvin Phillips, Dennis Randall, Rubel Shelly, Calvin Warpula, Lynn Anderson, Mike Armour, Denny Boultinghouse, Doug Foster, Milt Jones, Tom Langford, Alex Wilson, Rick Atchley, Jeff Walling, and my co-presenter today, Jerry Rushford. No one has done more for unity on the West Coast than Brother Jerry with his work as director of the great Pepperdine Bible Lectures. His work with that premier event among churches of Christ began in 1983, two years before the Restoration Forum began. He has always been inclusive, bringing in speakers from Christian churches to be on the program (a record 14 last year). He has had me on the program 10 years running. When he wrote his classic *Christians on the Oregon Trail* he asked me write a blurb for the back of the dust jacket and also included my poem “O Oregon!” in the book. I consider him – and all of these just cited – to be among my best friends on earth. I would lay down my life for any one of them. I believe the greatest tragedy of the 1906 division was that it separated us for many years from meeting, hearing, knowing, and loving wonderful brothers like these!

BEYOND SLOGANS

Our forefathers had a slogan: “In essential, unity; in opinions, liberty; in all things, charity (love).” In fact, this final forum is based on the third triad of that famous trinity: “In all things, love.” But perhaps it is time to move beyond those three. Here’s what I offered seven years ago in an article in *Christian Standard* called “Beyond Slogans”:

- In conversation, sincerity
- In disagreements, maturity
- In demeanor, dignity
- In conduct, integrity
- In speaking of self, brevity
- In praise of others, liberality
- In preaching, authority
- In teaching, simplicity
- In correction, humility
- In interpretations, sensibility
- In sharing knowledge, modesty
- In reaching decisions, unanimity

- In forgiveness, magnanimity
- In friendships, affinity
- In relationships, fidelity
- In secrets shared, confidentiality
- In trials, sympathy
- In suffering, empathy
- In death, generosity

This we will tell the next generation!

Jean Paul Richter said, “Man has here two and a half minutes – one to smile, one to sigh, and a half to love; for in the midst of this minute, he dies.” I’ve noticed that when men grow old they become more mellow and understanding. Why is this? Because they realize that time is too short for anything else. At last they have come to understand that great Restoration principle, “In all things, love.” The aged apostle John, once known as a “son of thunder,” spent his last years literally being carried about by strong young men. And what was his wish? His death wish, you might say? Here it again and again and again in his three postcards known as 1, 2, & 3 John. “Little children, love one another.”

An old Welsh proverb says, “It is easy for them who have never been loved to sneer at love.” Surely we cannot sneer at love. Surely we have all experienced the love of God. “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11 NASB).

Indeed, we have a noble heritage. **What our fathers have told us, we will not hide from their children; we will tell the next generation!**

A sermon preached by Victor Knowles September 5, 2007, at Restoration Forum XXV, Ozark Christian College, Joplin, Mo. Also preached by Victor Knowles, September 9, 2008, Woodland Bible Camp, Senior Citizen’s Week, Linton, IN