

Lee Parish

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Restoration History

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David Lipscomb: A Child of God, a Soldier of the Cross

Few men have stood as tall and as humbly as David Lipscomb. The life of David Lipscomb is one that is not easily parsed. He was at the same time simple and complex. He was a deep thinker, but he was plain of speech. Lipscomb was uncompromising in his stand for truth, yet he was kind and compassionate to all, even those with whom he disagreed. This is not to say that he was duplicitous, for he was as transparent as a man could be. Simply put, he did not fit into any one person's mold. His desire was not to be popular or highly respected, but simply to be pleasing to God in all respects; this really is the story of David Lipscomb's life. His intense and overriding desire to serve God, and his childlike faith in the promises of the Prince of Peace combined to produce one of the most influential religious men the world has ever known.

The Early Years

While David Lipscomb's early years were not, on the whole, that remarkable for a boy growing up in the frontier of Franklin County, Tennessee in the mid-1800s, the religious influences that helped him become the man he was are easily seen. Lipscomb was born on January 21, 1831 to Granville and Ann Lipscomb. Granville was a successful farmer who owned several slaves. Convinced that slavery was wrong, Granville moved the Lipscomb family to Illinois in 1835 in an effort to free his slaves. However, the move to Illinois was devastating to the Lipscomb family. In the summer of 1836, Ann Lipscomb died along with three young

children, leaving Granville, David, and older brother William. Not long after, the Lipscomb family returned to Franklin County, Tennessee to stay.

Granville was a deeply religious man. While he did not possess the speaking ability needed to effectively preach (West 27), he was nonetheless responsible for much good in the kingdom. According to Srygley, Granville “would always talk on the subject of religion to everyone with whom he came in contact...he also contributed liberally to support preachers, and took an active interest in the church near his home, which he was largely instrumental in establishing and maintaining” (154). Granville’s influence was strong on David. In 1844, Granville sent William and David to Virginia to stay with their maternal grandfather who was a Baptist. While there, they attended a Baptist Sunday school at the urging of their father. David determined to memorize more Scripture than his friends, and so within the course of a year, David memorized the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles (Hooper 29).

The next year, William and David enrolled in Tolbert Fanning’s Franklin College. This would prove to be one of the most important times in Lipscomb’s life, as Tolbert Fanning’s influence on Lipscomb would never wane. Lipscomb was baptized by Fanning at the age of fifteen. While David did not excel at school early on, William certainly did. William graduated a year ahead of David, and then was hired to teach Latin and Greek to the seniors at Franklin College. For one year David had the unique opportunity to learn under the tutelage of his brother (West 50). David was graduated from Franklin College in the fall of 1849 at the age of 18. Having received a solid education, Lipscomb set out to make a life for himself.

Not a Preacher

For the next six years Lipscomb made his living as a farmer in Georgia and Tennessee. He never had planned to preach, and never considered himself a preacher, but necessity

compelled him. His first attempt at preaching did not go as planned. After much study and preparation, Lipscomb rose to deliver his message only to forget every word he had planned to say. Lipscomb asked George Stroud, a preacher with about fifty years of experience, to finish the lesson, but the man was so surprised that he could not finish. On the way home, Stroud turned to Lipscomb after some time and tried to encourage him, “Brother David, I hope you will not let this discourage you,” he said. Lipscomb was prepared for such a remark and replied, “Well, Brother Stroud, I will not be discouraged, if I can help it; but I confess that it is enough to discourage a young man to see a man who has been preaching fifty years make such a failure as you made today” (Srygley 157,8).

Lipscomb did not allow that failure to discourage him. He began preaching and encouraging congregations all over the McMinnville area. Lipscomb was never considered a skilled orator, but his lessons were always biblical and always meaningful to the hearers. While he never considered himself a preacher, he became one of the most well-known and sought after preachers in the south. He most often was found preaching in small places to small numbers. He once preached to a group of five with three being baptized, about which Lipscomb would say that his preaching resulted in over half the attendees being baptized. Lipscomb was also mindful of the poor. He was willing to preach to anyone who was willing to hear regardless of age, class, or color.

The War

The Civil War had a profound impact upon the life of David Lipscomb. While in school at Franklin College, Lipscomb had demonstrated great interest in and fondness for the democratic system of this Republic. However, as the sounds of a coming war grew closer, Lipscomb demonstrated a changed spirit. Tolbert Fanning had begun publishing the *Gospel*

Advocate in 1855 and had been pleading with the southern brethren to stay out of the coming conflict. To the north, Benjamin Franklin did the same in the *American Christian Review*. In his preaching efforts, Lipscomb appealed to brethren to stay aloof from war. He could not imagine brethren killing brethren. Of the Christian he would later write, “no violence, no sword, no bitterness or wrath can he use” (*Civil Government* 87). To Lipscomb it was clear; loyalty to the kingdom of Christ far outweighed any loyalty to the kingdoms of this world (West 84). Through the efforts of Lipscomb, Fanning, and others, many Christians did not enter the strife at the beginning. However, in October 1863, the American Christian Missionary Society passed a resolution in favor of the North. This gave many southern Christians the impetus to join the fight. As a result many Christians on both sides were killed. Lipscomb was heartbroken.

His message was consistent no matter the outcome. When the Confederacy held Nashville, he was decried as a traitor. When the Union army held Nashville he was called a Copperhead, a clear reference to the anti-war northerners (West 91). Lipscomb’s position was unfavorable to either party, but he stood firm and spoke out despite the consequences. He was once suspected of being a Yankee spy and General Nathan Forest sent an officer to hear Lipscomb preach. Following Lipscomb’s discourse on the Christian’s relation to the government, the officer said to Lipscomb, “I have not yet reached a conclusion as to whether or not the doctrine of the sermon is loyal to the Southern Confederacy, but I am profoundly convinced it is loyal to the Christian religion” (West 81). His courage to stand for the truth was commendable and his love for the Kingdom of Christ was undeniable. It would be a position he would staunchly hold for the remainder of his life.

A Prolific Pen

The efforts of Lipscomb during the war were indicative of the battles he would fight in his many years as editor of the *Gospel Advocate*. When the war broke out, Tolbert Fanning had to cease publication. After the war, Lipscomb knew that the *Advocate* needed to be restarted. Fanning was too busy to do it alone and William's interest was in teaching, so on January 1, 1866, David Lipscomb and Tolbert Fanning began to publish again the *Gospel Advocate*. It did not take long for Fanning to cease editing the *Advocate*, which left Lipscomb alone in this great work. Two topics dominated the first year of the *Advocate*: Lipscomb's writings on the relationship Christians should have to civil government, and pleas to help the destitute Christians in the south. For over 47 years, Lipscomb would pilot the most influential of brotherhood publications.

Controversy seemed to be all around, and Lipscomb did not see the need to avoid the controversial issues. In 1849, the American Christian Missionary Society was formed in Cincinnati, Ohio. Lipscomb was warm to the idea of missionary societies early on, but having studied the issue more, he became a staunch opponent. He believed that societies usurped the God-given role of the church to evangelize. This controversy would be one of the two main issues that resulted in the broad division recognized fully in the 1906 census. The other issue was instrumental music. Some well-known brethren such as J.W. McGarvey and Moses Lard supported the society and opposed the instrument. To Lipscomb these two issues stood or fell together. Humble says, "Lipscomb thought that if he could open the door of expediency wide enough to admit the missionary society, he could take in the instrument with no extra effort" (60). Lipscomb recognized that the society and the instrument were merely symptoms of an underlying problem; it really hinged upon an understanding of authority and expediency.

In 1910 another controversy arose to which Lipscomb was connected. Brethren at Henderson, Tennessee desired to send out an evangelist into West Tennessee. They invited support from other congregations. The only thing interested congregations needed to do was send in money to the Henderson church. The Henderson church would then select and oversee the evangelist. As they understood the issue, the editors at the *Advocate* felt that this was merely the missionary society disguised as a church. Lipscomb, as quoted by West, stated, “Now what was that but the organization of a society in the elders of this church? The church elders at Henderson constitute a board to collect and pay out the money and control the evangelist for the brethren of West Tennessee, and all the preachers are solicitors for this work” (275). While there was some discussion as to the true intent of the Henderson church, J.C. McQuiddy expressed the opinion of all at the *Advocate*, “the work proposed is nothing less than a missionary society in embryo.” He went on to say that the organization as envisioned by the Henderson church was, “a combination larger than the organized church of the New Testament which is the only organized body ordained by Jehovah for doing mission work” (West 276). Due in part to the opposition of the *Advocate* the Henderson church’s plan did not go forward.

Lipscomb’s writings were prevalent all throughout the south, stretching as far west as Texas, where the *Gospel Advocate* had a large readership. Very few weeks went by that Lipscomb did not have at least one article in print. He also produced commentaries on the Gospel of John, Acts, and the New Testament Epistles. Additionally, his articles on the Christian’s relationship to civil government, originally published in the *Advocate*, were compiled into a book and published in 1889. In 1913 J.W. Shepherd compiled some of Lipscomb’s most theologically rich writings into a book entitled *Salvation From Sin*. Lipscomb retired from full time work with the *Advocate* in 1912, though he retained editor’s status until his death.

Lipscomb was a true soldier of the cross. Only God knows how many people were impacted by Lipscomb's prolific pen.

The Greatest Man on the Continent

Lipscomb's writings would not be the only work he did that would outlive him. Along with James A. Harding, Lipscomb founded the Nashville Bible School. The school opened in the fall of 1891 with 32 students concluding the first year. One of Lipscomb's greatest joys was teaching young men and women the Bible. Lipscomb's instruction was always the same; he would read from the Bible and make comments along the way, exposing the text to his pupils. Lipscomb believed that a biblically based education would benefit a student in whatever field they chose for employment. Lipscomb's father, Granville, believed "that if men could be taught the Bible, they would know the will of God. If they could be induced to follow that way, it would mean the betterment of the world and their eternal salvation" (West 34).

Lipscomb was an excellent, if demanding, teacher. The faculty expected every graduate to, among other things, "repeat from memory every prayer, every speech, and every parable of the New Testament in both the English and Greek tongue. Each student was expected to give a detailed sketch of every Bible character, major and minor" (West 204). For all of this work, students received only a book; no degrees were offered. Harding viewed the conferment of degrees as simply "empty titles" being "easily obtained" (West 208).

In spite of the great expectations, most students loved Uncle Dave as he came to be called. One student, in the May 7, 1964 edition of the *Gospel Advocate*, recalled an April Fools' joke played on Lipscomb by his students. In 1912 Charles Brewer went out to preach on Sunday, March 31. He missed the Monday morning train back to school and arrived at school late in the afternoon. Upon arrival, he learned that the boys had played hooky as an April Fools' prank. The

young Brewer went to Lipscomb's house to explain his absence to which Lipscomb smiled and replied, "I am glad you did not go off with the young April Fools. It seems to me they play the fool enough all the time without having to take a special day to demonstrate" (293).

Harding once called Lipscomb, "the greatest man on the continent" (West 214).

Harding's assessment could hardly be limited to the classroom. To Lipscomb, Christianity was much more than just knowing facts and reciting verses. He lived his faith and demonstrated daily that he was a child of God. One such shining example was during the cholera outbreak in Nashville during the summer of 1873. The outbreak reached epidemic levels and a conservative estimate of the death total numbered 1,000 souls. While many trainloads of people fled to the safety of surrounding areas, David Lipscomb remained in Nashville. Lipscomb spent much of his time in the destitute black communities. Even though Lipscomb was not an entirely healthy man, he cleaned and fed those who could not help themselves (Hooper 152-6).

Lipscomb did not come out of the epidemic unscathed. Due to his efforts in Nashville, Lipscomb contracted the disease and fought for his life. He spent most of the early part of 1874 recovering from cholera (Hooper 136). To Lipscomb, it was his duty to be Christ-like, "the pledge that we solemnly make in our profession of faith in Christ and of our baptism into him, is that we strive to reproduce his life before the world in our own lives." For Lipscomb it was clear what Christ would have done had he been in Nashville: he would have helped the helpless, and relieved "the pressing needs of the suffering" (Hooper 154, 5). Lipscomb constantly sacrificed himself for the benefit of others, recognizing that to be like Christ meant one must love others as one's self.

Aunt Mag

In the midst of the Civil War, Lipscomb found and wed the woman that would stay with him for the remainder of his life. On July 23, 1862 David Lipscomb at the age of 31 married twenty year old Margaret Zellner. Aunt Mag, as she would later be affectionately called, stood by Lipscomb's side through all his battles. Together, they had only one child, a boy named Zellner, but he lived only nine months. While the sting of the loss of Zellner lingered all through the years, their home was often filled with young children, having many nieces, nephews, and poor children living with them. At one point, eleven extra people lived in the Lipscomb house, five of whom were black children. Two children were particularly dear to the Lipscombs, nephew David Lipscomb Jr. and niece Margaret Callendar. Uncle Dave and Aunt Mag considered David and Margaret their own children.

By all accounts, Aunt Mag was a true Christian lady. She worked hard managing the household, enjoyed gardening and quilting, and was a skilled seamstress, making all of Lipscomb's clothes. She cared for her often sickly husband with great love and dutiful attention. With Aunt Mag as a homemaker, the Lipscomb home was always a welcoming place for visitors, both friends and strangers (Hooper 172-83). The Lipscombs made several places home with Bell's Bend and Avalon being the two most prominent. David and Margaret owned 600 acres in Bell's Bend, west of Nashville. While they loved their home and the farm, it was a difficult twenty mile round-trip journey for David to the *Gospel Advocate* offices. It was determined a permanent move was necessary, so in 1883 they moved to Avalon, the place they would call home for the remainder of their time on earth. Aunt Mag poured her heart and energy into making their new house a home. This home on Granny White Pike is now located on the campus of Lipscomb University, formerly known as the Nashville Bible School.

As Lipscomb grew older, he relied on Aunt Mag even more than before. Not only did she make his clothes, but she also “cut his hair, trimmed his beard, and even combed his hair when leaving the house. Before leaving on his preaching appointments, Mrs. Lipscomb always tied his shoe laces” (Hooper 307). Those who knew her declared that she was a great woman; some, including David Lipscomb believed her to be the best woman who ever lived (Hooper 308).

As the years steadily wore on, Lipscomb’s pen grew quiet. He spent more and more time at home with his dear wife. He would sit in his favorite chair with his Bible in his hands. No longer able to read, the familiar feel of the Book of Life would comfort him during his last days. As 1917 came, death was quickly approaching for this humble servant of Christ. On Sunday, November 11, 1917, Lipscomb slipped from this life into eternity. By his side as she had been for 55 years was his dear wife. With his course finished and his race run, Margaret prayed “Lord Jesus, receive his spirit” (Hooper 320). Aunt Mag’s work was not done. She waited nine years to follow Uncle Dave, leaving this life on March 5, 1926.

David Lipscomb’s funeral was simple with J.C. McQuiddy, E.A. Elam, C.A. Moore, and longtime friend and *Advocate* co-editor, E.G. Sewell speaking. Sewell, who knew Lipscomb as well as anyone except Margaret, spoke of the nature of Lipscomb’s influence, “He has lived a faithful, Christian life, and his life and his life work will live on. That will not die, that will not pass out now as he passes, that will not go down to the grave as he goes to the grave. His life work will go on and on for years to come” (Hooper xiv).

A Life That Lives On

It is hard to underestimate the influence that David Lipscomb has had on Christianity. His work with the *Gospel Advocate* indeed continues to live on. Lipscomb envisioned himself in-between the extremes, standing on the Bible and calling those on either side to join together in

the truth. Today many view Lipscomb through the prism of their own prejudices, using his writings to promote their own agenda, or dismissing him altogether because he doesn't fit their mold. But just as David Lipscomb refused to be manipulated or marginalized, so his life's work is still a stubborn anchor against extremism. Lipscomb is a shining example of what a simple good-hearted person can do when he places his feet firmly on the Gospel, and fixes his eyes toward heaven. David Lipscomb was not perfect, but God used him, imperfections and all, to do a great work in a time of great turmoil. May he ever be remembered as a child of God and a soldier of the cross.