

**Pepperdine University**

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## A Preacher in the White House

Jerry Rushford, *Pepperdine University*



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# A Preacher in the White House (1)

JERRY RUSHFORD

The Restoration Movement originated on the American frontier (1804-1809) in a period of religious enthusiasm and ferment. The first leaders of the movement deplored the numerous divisions in the church and urged the unity of all Christians through a restoration of New Testament Christianity. Protestantism had gone astray, they felt, and the "denominations" must be directed back to primitive Christianity. They generally conceived that this would be possible if everyone would wear the name "Christian" or Disciple" and return to the Biblical pattern of the New Testament church in doctrine, worship, and practice.

Those two ideas—the restoration of New Testament Christianity and the reunion of all Christians—became a distinctive "plea," and unceasingly, in season and out of season, they penetrated the frontier with their appeal. They called their efforts the "Restoration Movement" or the "Current Reformation" and saw themselves as participants in a movement within the existing churches aimed at eliminating all sectarian divisions.

The members of the Restoration Movement accepted the Bible as the absolute and final authority in religion, and they believed that an intelligent investigation of that source would result in the discovery of truth. An early motto was; "We speak where the Bible speaks, and we are silent where the Bible is silent." With unabashed zeal they waged war on all human religious creeds and pleaded with all men to take "the Bible as the only sure guide to Heaven."

Of the two main streams of the movement, one was led by Barton W. Stone of Lexington, Kentucky, and the other by Alexander Campbell of Bethany, Virginia (now West Virginia). Of the two, priority in time belongs to Stone. In the summer of 1804 he left the Presbyterian Church to become part of an independent movement of "Christian Churches." Having renounced the name "Presbyterian" as sectarian, these churches agreed henceforth to call themselves "Christians." In a short time Stone had become the acknowledged leader, and the movement began to enjoy a rapid growth in the states of Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana and Tennessee.

In 1809 the Campbells, unaware of Stone's movement, severed their ties with the Presbyterian Church and formed their own independent movement. They called themselves "Reformers" or "Disciples," and for nearly eighteen years (1813-1830) they had a tenuous relationship with Regular Baptists. In 1823 Campbell founded his first monthly, the *Christian Baptist*, and for seven years he used it to gain followers among the Baptists of western Pennsylvania, Ohio, western Virginia and Kentucky. Through the pages of this paper Campbell exposed sectarianism and pleaded for the "restoration of the ancient order of things."

Despite difficulties of travel and communication, the two streams criss-crossed on the frontier and gradually became aware of one another. When Stone and Campbell met in 1824, they recognized that the principles of Christians and Disciples were strikingly similar. These similarities paved the way for a future merger of the two restoration movements.

Meanwhile, the Campbell movement had experienced a positive reception among the Mahoning Baptist Association churches on the Western Reserve. Through the evangelistic efforts of Walter Scott in 1827-1830, the Western Reserve became "the principal theatre" of the Disciples. Scott's preaching contained a sharply defined "gospel plan of salvation." If man would confess his faith in Christ, repent of his sins and be baptized into Christ, God would respond by remitting man's sins and granting him the gifts of the Holy Spirit and eternal life. This message resulted in a great revival which so transformed the association that it dissolved itself out of existence and was absorbed by the Disciple movement. That ended the seventeen year marriage with the Baptists and freed Campbell's "Disciples" to come together with Stone's "Christians."

In 1830 Campbell changed the name of his paper to the *Millennial Harbinger*, which reflected this optimistic faith that a golden age for Christianity was dawning. A number of consultation meetings between the leaders of Christians and Disciples in 1831 led to a large unity meeting at Lexington, Kentucky, on January 1, 1832, in which both groups agreed that they should unite. Since neither group recognized an ecclesiastical authority above the local church, actual union could only be accomplished by going to the congregations and urging them to unite. This was accomplished on a broad scale, and it was estimated that the united Campbell-Stone movement probably had over 20,000 members in 1832.

The American religious movement which resulted from the Campbell-Stone merger never agreed on an exclusive name. Campbell preferred "Disciples of Christ," whereas Stone had an attachment to "Christian Church." In some localities the name "Church of Christ" had been widely used by members of both groups. Throughout most of the nineteenth century all three of these names were accepted and used interchangeably.

Between 1832 and 1860 the Restoration Movement multiplied from 20,000 to 200,000 and became history's "greatest religious movement of peculiarly American origin." This acceleration convinced many members of the church of the righteousness of their cause. Undoubtedly James A. Garfield exaggerated when he wrote in 1855: "The cause in which we are engaged must take the world," but he was not alone. Many overly optimistic members of the church saw their rapid growth as an indication that in time they would conquer the nation if not the world.

By 1880 the Restoration Movement had emerged as one of the six largest religious bodies in America. It was estimated that the movement encompassed more than 600,000 baptized believers. In that same year of 1880, the movement received a national recognition and prestige which it had never before enjoyed. This occurred when one of its former preachers, James A. Garfield, was elected President of the United States. In the next article, we will examine the relationship of James A. Garfield to the Restoration Movement.

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# A Preacher in the White House (2)

JERRY RUSHFORD

This year marks the centennial of James A. Garfield's election to the presidency. On November 2, 1880, ten million Americans went to the polls and elected a former preacher to be the twentieth President of the United States.

James A. Garfield (1831-1881), the only preacher to ever occupy the Oval Office, was a product of the profound social, intellectual and religious ferment of the early decades of the nineteenth century which produced the American religious movement known as the Restoration Movement. The first fifty years of the Restoration Movement (following the Campbell-Stone merger in 1832) closely paralleled Garfield's life.

Garfield was reared on Ohio's Western Reserve, "the principal theatre" of Alexander Campbell's movement to restore New Testament Christianity. His parents were baptized into Christ by Adamson Bentley, one of Campbell's co-laborers. At the age of eighteen (1850), Garfield was baptized into Christ by W. A. Lillie. While a student at the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute (1851-1854), a Christian academy at nearby Hiram, Garfield cultivated an inner circle of friends and developed the ability to preach the gospel. It was assumed by everyone, including Garfield, that he would devote his life to the ministry of preaching.

When Garfield attended Williams College in western Massachusetts (1854-1856), he frequently accepted invitations to preach for small congregations affiliated with the Restoration Movement. The fervor of Garfield's commitment to this cause was evident in the letters he sent to his Christian friends back in Ohio. In one letter to his former roommate at Hiram, written in the summer before Garfield's senior year at Williams, he said:

I tell you, my dear brother, the cause in which we are engaged must take the world. It fills my soul when I reflect upon the light, joy and love of the Ancient Gospel and its adaptation to the wants of the human race. I look upon old New England as a wilderness of dead pines, where the winds moan solemnly, and though they play an orthodox tune, yet they can not much longer keep time with the on-rushing spirit of free thought, free speech and free gospel. Our Reformation is the greatest light of the nineteenth century: I believe it. I long to be in the thickest of the fight, and see the army of Truth charge home upon the battalions of hoary-headed error. But I must be content to be a spy for a time, till I have reconnoitered the enemy's strongholds, and then I hope to work.

However, during his senior year at Williams College, Garfield became interested in politics for the first time in his life. When a new political organization called the Republican Party was launched that year, Garfield saw an additional outlet for his ability as a public speaker. He made several political speeches on behalf of the Republican presidential candidate, John C. Fremont. By the time he returned to teach at Hiram, Garfield was already formulating plans for entering "the field of statesmanship" through the "educational portal."

In his first three years after his return to Hiram (1856-1859), Garfield was made president of the Eclectic, married into a strong Christian family, and became "a favorite preacher" among Christians on the Western Reserve. In addition to preaching somewhere every Sunday, he preached in many protracted meetings. Typical sermon topics included: "The Savior's Second Coming," "The Evidences of Christianity," "The Parable of the Wedding," "Salvation as Illustrated by the Deluge," and "The Necessity of Obeying Whatever God Commands of Us."

During these same years, Garfield was laying the groundwork for a political career with the Eclectic as a base and his beloved "Hiram circle" of colleagues (especially Harry Rhodes and Burke Hinsdale) as associates and supporters. In 1859, with the support of several influential members of the church, Garfield won election to the Ohio Senate and "gained a step in the direction of my purpose." His campaign had been skillfully managed by Harmon Austin, a prominent banker and an elder in the church.

On the first Sunday in November, 1860, Garfield was in Wellington, Ohio, to speak at the dedication of a new church building. He was sought out that day by a woman who wanted a clear definition of what the Restoration Movement stood for. In response to her request, Garfield penned the following statement:

1. We call ourselves Christians, or Disciples of Christ.
2. We believe in God the Father.
3. We believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and our Saviour. We regard the divinity of Christ as the fundamental truth of the Christian system.
4. We believe in the Holy Spirit, both as to his agency in conversion and as indwelling in the heart of the Christian.
5. We accept both the Old and the New Testament Scriptures as the inspired Word of God.
6. We believe in the future punishment of the wicked and the future reward of the righteous.

7. We believe that the Deity is a prayer hearing and a prayer answering God.

8. We observe the institution of the Lord's Supper on the Lord's Day. To this table we neither invite nor debar; we say it is the Lord's Supper for all the Lord's children.

9. We plead for the union of God's people on the Bible and the Bible alone.

10. The Christ is our only creed.

11. We maintain that all the ordinances should be observed as they were in the days of the Apostles.

This classic little statement, called "What We Stand For" or "Our Position," was well received in the Restoration Movement. It was reprinted on a number of occasions.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Garfield saw his course clearly. When Governor Dennison assured him that successful military leaders would rule the nation for twenty years after the war, Garfield eagerly accepted command of the Forty-Second Ohio. With evangelistic zeal he recruited hundreds of members of the church into his regiment. He also persuaded "Uncle Harry" Jones, one of the most popular preachers in the Restoration Movement, to be his chaplain.

During Garfield's military years (1861-1863) he won rapid promotion to the rank of major general, and through the diligent work of his Christian friends back home he won election to Congress. His congressional career began in December, 1863, and continued until the autumn of 1880 when he was elected to the Presidency.

Throughout Garfield's long career as a Congressman, he retained his strong ties to the Restoration Movement. He was one of the founders of a new weekly periodical for the church called the *Christian Standard*, and he accepted a position on the Board of Trustees of both Hiram College and Bethany College. He was always faithful in his attendance at the Vermont Avenue church in Washington. He took the lead in helping the congregation raise money to purchase a meetinghouse in 1869, and he occasionally taught in the Sunday School program.

Garfield was helped significantly by members of the church back home in Ohio in the building of a political base (he won ten consecutive elections in the Western Reserve), and they in turn shared in the prestige and influence of his expanding career. In the next article we will look at how the church responded to Garfield's nomination for the presidency.

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FIRM FOUNDATION—OCTOBER 21, 1980



# A Preacher in the White House (3)

JERRY RUSHFORD

When James A. Garfield arrived in Chicago near the close of May, 1880, for the Republican national convention, he was, as one member of the church put it, "the best dark horse." Even before the convention opened, there was evidence that the party was hopelessly divided over its three major candidates—U.S. Grant, James G. Blaine and John Sherman. A deadlocked convention was foreseeable, and a number of men were already actively at work for Garfield's nomination.

On his first Sunday in town, May 30, Garfield sought out his brethren. He worshiped with the South Side congregation which met at the corner of Indiana Avenue and 25th Street. The following Sunday, June 6, came in the midst of the hectic week-long convention. It was an exceedingly stormy morning, and a cold rain was blowing in from nearby Lake Michigan. Nevertheless, Garfield hailed a carriage and drove over three miles to meet with his brethren.

During the course of the convention, Garfield gave a spontaneous speech that "captured the whole convention" and set off an enthusiastic demonstration. At the peak of this ovation, Garfield spotted a Hiram graduate, and pulling him near, asked: "How many Hiram boys do you think there are in the gallery?" In a moment of personal triumph, his first thought was to know how many of the Hiram circle were there to feel pride in his achievement. Throughout the marathon proceedings, there were a growing number of demonstrations for the dark horse from Ohio.

Finally, after thirty-four frustrating roll calls in which none of the major candidates could muster a majority, the movement for Garfield began to gather momentum. Wisconsin was the first state to shift its votes to Garfield, and on the thirty-sixth ballot the nomination was made unanimous in a stampede. While Garfield sat motionless in his chair, thousands of partisans triumphantly chanted his name in an emotion-packed scene no convention has ever rivaled.

After the convention, Garfield immediately returned to Hiram to fulfill a long-standing speaking engagement at Hiram College. The Hiram band in a wagon decorated with flags met his train at Garrettsville, and he was led in a triumphant procession over the three miles back to Hiram. There he was reunited with his wife in a tearful embrace, and he graciously accepted the plaudits of Burke Hinsdale, Harmon Austin and the others. The following day Garfield presided at the special college reunion that was held every five years, and he spoke at the annual commencement exercises.

The news of Garfield's nomination was received with pleasure and surprise in much of the brotherhood. In the North, the four leading weekly periodicals were unanimous in their approval of the con-

vention's choice. Perhaps John F. Rowe, the editor of the *American Christian Review*, summed up the feeling best when he editorialized:

General James A. Garfield, recently nominated by the Chicago Republican Convention for the Presidency of the United States, is a member of the Church of Christ, and has been for about thirty years . . . besides being a statesman of acknowledged ability, his private life has been pure, and . . . his Christian character is without a stain. . . . We have known Bro. Garfield personally for twenty-five years, and during all that time have known him as a humble Christian. . . . The last time we were in Washington city we found him teaching a Bible class in the Sunday-school. . . . We have spoken these few words in praise of Bro. Garfield as a Christian citizen . . . because we think our brethren at large feel pleased that so distinguished an honor has been conferred on one of our brethren.

The other editors—Isaac Errett of the *Christian Standard*; James Harvey Garrison of the *Christian*; and Barton Warren Johnson of the *Evangelist*—all wrote encouraging editorials endorsing the Garfield candidacy.

However, there were some in the church, notably from the South, who viewed the Garfield nomination with mounting alarm. In Texas, C. M. Wilmeth, editor of the *Christian Preacher* in Dallas, and Thomas R. Burnett, editor of the *Christian Messenger* in Bonham, were opposed to Garfield's candidacy for both political and personal reasons. Neither of them could conscientiously support the Republican party, and they had never forgiven Garfield for his desire to confiscate the property of the South at the close of the Civil War. In Nashville, Tennessee, David Lipscomb, editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, was not really opposed to Garfield for political or personal reasons, but for theological reasons. For over fifteen years, Lipscomb had been teaching in the pages of the *Advocate* that the Christian should be totally noninvolved in civil government.

Those who opposed Lipscomb in the South had always argued that religion and religious character were needed in the political world. But now with Garfield's nomination, Lipscomb saw an excellent opportunity to reaffirm his convictions on the Christian's relation to civil government. The June 24 issue of the *Advocate* carried Lipscomb's first volley: "But now, dear brethren of the South who wish to argue for good, pious, religious rulers, what are you going to do about Bro. Garfield? Are you going to vote for him, or will you take up an ungodly Democrat?" If the readers of the *Advocate* in the heavily Democratic South were caught off guard by that question, they were stunned

a month later when Lipscomb wrote:

Gen Garfield is a member of the church of Christ. He is a man in good standing in that church. He is intimate with a great number of well-known and leading disciples of Christ. They all regard him as a man of honor and integrity . . . we are satisfied that we know of no man who has gone into politics, who has become so thoroughly identified with the affairs of government, and yet so well retained his Christian character and religious interest as has General Garfield. . . . Every disciple of Christ in the land that believes religion and religious character is needed in the political world . . . is under solemn obligation to vote for Gen Garfield.

Lipscomb took his attack further when he challenged the readers of his *Advocate* to ask themselves why Thomas A. Burnett would not support Garfield editorially in the pages of the *Christian Messenger*. "Is it because he thinks more of his politics than his religion?" Lipscomb asked. "Or is it because Garfield is unpopular in Bro. Burnett's section, and if he were to act out his principle, it would cost him a few subscribers. . . ." Lipscomb's southern friends begged him to leave the issue alone, and his controversial stand did cost him some subscribers. But he had made his point. "We have had one simple purpose before us," he told his readers in August, "that is, to show those brethren who have insisted that religion is needed in politics and that religious men in high places of government would promote the cause of religion, do not really believe this. . . ."

Having established his point, Lipscomb revealed his true feelings about the Garfield nomination by writing:

I now say that I firmly believe that his election would be a source of great corruption and injury to the church of Jesus Christ. I would be glad not on political but purely religious grounds, to see him and every other member of a church of Christ who aspires to office, defeated—so badly defeated, too, that it will crush out all hope that any one of them can ever be elected, and so to drive out all thought and aspiration for political office.

When John F. Rowe challenged Lipscomb to a written debate on the subject, he received a swift acceptance. Throughout the autumn of 1880, while the nation was caught up in an exciting presidential campaign, Lipscomb and Rowe were discussing the question, "Can Christians Vote and Hold Office?" The articles of each were carried in both the *Advocate* and the *Review*, and they aroused considerable interest. In the next article we will see how the church responded to Garfield's election. Pepperdine University, Malibu, California 90265



# A Preacher in the White House (4)

JERRY RUSHFORD

On November 2, 1880, ten million Americans went to the polls and elected James A. Garfield to be the twentieth President of the United States. But Garfield's victory was no landslide. He squeaked by with a popular plurality of only 7,368 votes, or less than one tenth of one percent of the total vote cast. As expected, Garfield failed to carry a single southern state, and he lost in Texas by nearly one hundred thousand votes. Each party carried nineteen states, but the Republicans won the important ones. Their narrow majorities in New York and Indiana spelled the difference between victory and defeat.

Garfield was deluged with congratulatory letters in the first week after his election, but none more significant than the one penned by Hinsdale. This good friend wrote:

I have been astonished . . . at the hold that your candidacy took of the religious mind of the country. It has stirred the Disciples with great power, but has reached out beyond them and embraced all the Protestant bodies 'Now we are going to have a religious man for President' is a thought that has swelled in the hearts of thousands of religious men.

However, Garfield was wary of the exuberant expectations of some of the members of the church. In a long letter to Hinsdale on November 17, 1880, Garfield carefully defined his relationship with his brethren:

Our people must not use me as the promoter of the views of our brethren. While I shall cheerfully maintain my old relation to them, I want it understood that it is the broad general views and not the special peculiarities of our faith that I desire to promote. Second. Our people must not make too much fuss about it. For example, they must not undertake to build a showy house in Washington. Third. Our people must remember that they are not a very large percent of the whole Republican party and a still smaller percent of the whole American people, and it would not be difficult for me to injure the administration by giving undue prominence to the Disciples in matters of appointment. Let us not flaunt ourselves in the face of the American people as though we had made a special conquest, but by modesty and moderation bear our part worthily and take whatever resulting advantages may come.

Hinsdale, of course, agreed with this stance. "Your views touching the religious matters are eminently sound, and in my place, I shall be glad to aid you in giving effect to them," he responded, "but there are afloat many extravagant expectations that cannot be realized."

These fears were well founded. Since the President was responsible for filling

one hundred thousand positions, members of the church came rushing into Washington from as far away as Texas and California with letters of recommendation from their elders. They were confident of getting the best government jobs from "Brother Garfield," but their stampede on Washington had just the opposite effect. As a result of such demands, Garfield resolutely determined that he would award no government positions to his brethren for fear of being charged with biasness. "Keep my brethren away from me," he snapped, "it annoys and wounds me for them to come asking for office because of our religious relations." But wherever he went in public, his brethren would rush up to shake his hand and say, "How are you, Brother Garfield?"

Nor was Garfield the only one set upon. Some of his closest friends in the church were pestered daily. Isaac Errett's biographer said: "A horde of hungry office-seekers knowing his intimate relations with the President-elect, besieged him, in season and out of season, with entreaties for influence." Among the more prominent preachers who sought government jobs was D. Pat Henderson, who wrote requesting that he be appointed consul to Liverpool. But the request was denied.

Garfield's inauguration was set for Friday, March 4, 1881. Rhodes and Hinsdale were invited to the White House to share breakfast with the new President on the morning of his inauguration. In the grandeur of the noble mansion, the three old friends reminisced about their happy years together in Hiram. This was the logical culmination of the "great things" the little band at Hiram had talked and dreamed of nearly a quarter of a century before.

Two mornings later, the attention of the nation was focused on the "obscure" meetinghouse of the Vermont Avenue church in Washington. This was an opportunistic Sunday for the congregation, and they made the most of it. A special program was arranged, with Garfield's approval, that included several nationally-known members of the church. Under a headline that read, "President Garfield at Church," the Associated press published a full account of the morning.

The responsibility for the sermon fell on Chaplain George C. Mullins of the United States Army, one of Garfield's good friends. Mullins preached on a portion of the third verse of Jude: ". . . ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." The sermon was entitled "The Faith of the Disciples," and its content was widely published throughout the country.

During Garfield's first frenetic months in office, his brethren were delighted with how steadfast he remained in his Sunday

attendance at the Vermont Avenue church. The reporters sneeringly referred to the Vermont meetinghouse as the "Campbellite shanty," but after Garfield's election its seats were always filled hours ahead of time.

On July 2, four months after he entered office, Garfield was shot by an assassin in the Washington railway station. He lingered on in weakness and extreme pain for several weeks before dying on September 19. Although the nation had come to expect the worst, the news that the President had died was the signal for the greatest outpouring of grief since the death of Lincoln. The casket lay in state for two days in the rotunda of the Capitol where it was viewed by more than 100,000 people. On the 23rd a funeral service was held in the rotunda with Frederick D. Power, the minister of the Vermont Avenue church, delivering the address.

The public funeral in Cleveland was on Monday the 27th. President Arthur called for a day of fasting and prayer throughout the land. Over a quarter of a million people were in the public park for the funeral ceremonies, in what was described as the largest funeral gathering in the history of the nation. Isaac Errett, the editor of the *Christian Standard* and one of Garfield's closest friends, delivered the funeral sermon.

One of the finest tributes the slain President received was from Dr. Noah Porter, the President of Yale College. Reflecting on Garfield's loyalty to his brethren, Dr. Porter said:

That President Garfield was more than a man of strong moral and religious convictions—that he was also a man of conscientious and fervid spiritual life, would scarcely be questioned. His whole history, from boyhood to the last, shows that duty to man and to God, and devotion to Christ in a life of faith and spiritual communion, were the controlling springs of his being, and to a more than usual degree. In my judgment, there is no more interesting feature of his character than his loyal allegiance to the body of Christians in which he was trained, and the fervent sympathy with which he shared in their Christian communion. Not many of the few 'wise and mighty and noble who are called' show a similar loyalty to the less stately and cultured Christian communions in which they have been reared. Too often it is true that, as they step upward in social and political significance, they step upward from one degree to another in some of the many types of fashionable Christianity. President Garfield adhered to the church of his mother, the church in which he was trained, and which he had served as a pillar and an evangelist.

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