



*Allen Wright*

## **Farmers By Day...Preachers By Night**

David Lipscomb wrote: *“It is well that a remembrance of those who labored for the good of others, have benefited their fellowmen and have left the world better for having lived in it, should be cherished. It is good to show appreciation of those who have unselfishly devoted their lives to the salvation of men, and to the service of God, and to hold them up as examples worthy of the admiration of the aged, and the emulation and imitation of the young. (Life of Jesse L. Sewell, pg. 5).*

The early preachers of the American Restoration Movement were men who walked with great faith. Each generation has produced well-known preachers. Most are familiar with the names of Campbell, Stone, McGarvey, Lard, Lipscomb, Tant, and Wallace. These spiritual giants traveled much. Many of them taught in schools or universities. They wrote extensively, first in papers owned by brethren, and later publishing books. Their sermons, debates, and their articles are still read today, years after they have died. They touched many lives. They did an enormous amount of good.

However, the majority of preachers lived in obscurity and in death have been forgotten by everyone but the Lord. There were hundreds and hundreds of lesser-known preachers, who didn't write very much, nor taught in the schools, and who traveled just a few counties from their home. Their names are not familiar to us today. Their work is largely forgotten. We do not have copies

of their sermons. They didn't publish any books. They suffered, endured, and triumphed in Christ.

These early preachers worked hard, supporting themselves and establishing congregations from rough frontier people. They farmed in the day and preached at night. These early preachers, without many books, and few resources, studied and learned principles the old fashioned way – by spending large amounts of time reading the word of God. They were men of the book. They did not have a legacy of Restoration writings to refer to. Their thoughts changed as they learned truth. They viewed preaching as a privilege. The hardships that they endured, and the poverty that they struggled with was not considered to be excuses to complain, quit or berate the brethren about.

One such preacher, who lived a long time ago, was Missouri's Allen Wright. He was born in Kentucky in 1809, the same year and state that Abraham Lincoln was born. He died in Lexington, Missouri in 1860. He most likely would have been completely forgotten had it not been for a few contemporaries who were touched by his life. Allen Wright was very influential to a young Moses Lard, J. W. McGarvey, and T.P. Haley. The significance of this is seen in that Lard devotes twelve pages in his first issue of Lard's Quarterly, to the life of Allen Wright.

Allen Wright was born in poverty, lived all his life in poverty, and as Lard described in volume one of Lard's Quarterly, “died worth about nothing.” Lard stated, “Though a faithful man and a beloved preacher, the churches always managed to keep brother Wright poor, very poor. Not one tenth of his time during his life if the horse he rode had laid down and died could he have replaced it with another without going in debt. And never was he able to command the means to school his children, as they deserved to be. His noble heart was many a time made sad by the extreme want to which himself and family were reduced.” Lard adds, “This was not right.” T.P. Haley, who knew Wright, said, “As a young preacher, with many mouths to feed, he would toil in the fields during the week, and preach on Saturday night and on Sunday. He preached without salary and most times without compensation” (Early Missouri Preachers, Vol. 1). These early frontier preachers preached to poor people who had very little to give. But these hardships did not stop the work of these great preachers.

Allen Wright was very successful in traveling about mid-Missouri baptizing many and establishing congregations. It was during these early years that Moses Lard would often travel with Allen Wright. In many ways Allen Wright was very different from Moses Lard. Lard was a writer, scholar and an educated man. Allen Wright was none of those things. Lard described Wright as a bald man who stood about six feet tall and weighed 190 pounds. “He was plain in his look, plain in his talk, plain at home, plain abroad, plain in the pulpit, plain out of it, plain always, plain everywhere.” Lard also said of Wright, “As to education, brother Wright simply had none; and it is but just to add, he knew he did not have, he never made the slightest pretensions to...His pronunciation was bad, his grammar wretched. Yet few men could command larger audiences than he; while hardly one profited them more. He took no vulgar pride in being uncultivated. He spoke of it seldom but always sadly...Though thus rude in speech, you soon forgot when listening to him.”

Lard said of Wright's preaching: “His preaching at times struck me as clumsy. His subject seemed to hang on his hands. His mind did not dash it off with ease and sprightliness. His words were the common terms of every day life, and were arranged with no reference either to elegance or effect. His style, though never polished, became at times truly majestic. Its rude grandeur positively amazed you. In the pulpit brother Wright was always earnest – earnest as though in the

chamber of death. His look was grave and deeply serious. Preaching with him was an affair with which men might not sport. Brother Wright's preaching was eminently rudimental. Indeed, the plain truth is, that he preached well, nothing else. The first principles of the Gospel were his themes and his delight. He understood them thoroughly and preached them as well as he understood them. Faith, repentance and baptism were subjects full of interest with him for seven discourses in the week. When preaching on these elementary topics he dotted every i, crossed every t, and still dashed nimbly on saying nothing that should not be said, and omitting nothing that should. We regret to have witnessed at times even amongst our own brethren a sneer at the kind of preaching of which we are now speaking."

Lard described traveling with Allen Wright: "Over broad prairies, and through deep woods, across gentle ridges and delightful vales, we plodded slowly on together. The light of the moon, and shadows cast by waving forest trees as they silently glided about us, imparted to many a piece of road the mystic air of an enchanted spot; while the gruff hoot of the owl, or the melancholy notes of the whippoorwill, served only to deepen the sullen gloom of night. Still on we went talking of the toils of the past and the hopes of the future. Give me a companion like Allen Wright, a scene like this, and converse pure and sweet as his, and I ask for nothing more divine on earth."

Wright moved near Springfield, Mo in 1841. During this period of time he planted many congregations in Southwest Missouri. After the death of his wife, Wright moved to Lexington, Missouri and became the first located preacher in the state. Wright had multitudes of friends, founded dozens of congregations of believers, and baptized thousands into Jesus Christ, including such future preachers as Alexander Procter, and Thomas Haley.

The success of Allen Wright was in his ability to be at home with the common frontier family. Wright was simple and plain as they were. Moses Lard saw this in Wright and stated, "It is hardly just perhaps, that his high appreciation of the common people was due solely to his plainness. He understood the common person and they accepted him. Bro. Wright's power lay not so much in his mind as in his religious and moral traits. He was eminently social. Few men mingled with the masses so successfully as he. He laughed heartily, abounded in rustic anecdotes, listened to what even a child would say, and replied frankly. In a crowd he did not seem grand but good; he struck no one remarkably, but left all loving him for his artlessness and purity. The common people saw in him what no one else saw in him but the common people, all for the reason he never neglected them nor slighted them. He got close to them and they got close to him. His adaptation to them and to their ways was perfect; and they repaid him with an affection as pure as it was universal. To see him in a frontier cabin, with hat off, coat off, boots off, sitting a little heavily in the chimney corner...talking to the family in his own peculiarly grave and tender style; and the secret of his wonderful power over the masses became at once explained. With that humble family in all its poverty, its toils, its hardships, its sorrows, its bereavements, he sympathized with a depth, which made him the idol of their hearts and the delight of their homes. To be in one such honest abode, just after dinner, as the Christian mother stood beside her table washing her dishes, and told him the simple story of her buried dead; to witness the feeling with which he entered into that tale, and drank in those maternal sobs; to hear his comfortings, and see him gild the future with the hope of its reunions in Christ; and dull must have been the eye that could not see an element of true greatness in Allen Wright. No bosom carried a sorrow too secret or too sacred for him. He was the confidant and the comforter of the stricken spirit. Wherever death had blighted hopes or crushed hearts', all leaned on him and wept as on a father. God had mellowed his noble heart by afflictions in his own family, and thus fitted him to act his part with wondrous effect in scenes

like these. I never thought him so great as when comforting the sorrowing children of the earth, and pointing them to the coming recompense. (Lard's Quarterly, pg. 33)

We often think of most of the early preachers as being great men in the pulpit. But Allen Wright made his mark in touching the lives of people one on one. As our Lord could be comfortable in a conversation with a Samaritan woman, or surrounded with children, or on a hillside teaching the disciples, Allen Wright grasped the importance of relating to people. His common ways became a virtue instead of a curse. He understood the harsh frontier life. He buried two wives in the Missouri soil. Haley tells this adventure in Wright's life: On one occasion as he was preaching a meeting out in a grove, he had to stop his lesson and correct two young ladies who were making too much of a disturbance with their talking. On his way home that evening, as he passed through a dense forest, a brother of one of the young women who had been reprimanded, came up behind the preacher to fight him. The preacher begged and argued that he would not fight. The man tried to attack the preacher, so he dismounted, tied his horse up, took off his overcoat and thoroughly whipped the man. The man begged to be released, and Wright found the opportunity to impress some great Biblical truths to this man.

Lard made this great observation about Wright's ability: "Yet how many men are there who would have buried even Allen Wright's fine native abilities to do good...because they cannot boast a classic education- men who because they cannot flash on the world like meteors refuse to glow like the humble worm. Every man has his talent, his sphere. Our motto is, let all work who can. Let him who is educated work, let him who is not educated work, let him work who has ten talents, let him work who has one, let all work, and none be despised."

Wright was a great admirer of Barton W. Stone. Wright had the habit of copying the traits of other preachers. Lard was aware of this and claimed, "Much of his preaching style was copied from others. He absorbed your thoughts, copied your manner and even the intonations of your voice as unconsciously as a babe mimics its mother. By some this was regarded as a defect in his preaching. I confess I never thought it so. In other men it might have been offensive, but in Allen Wright it was not. It was done so innocently, and so effectively, that it gave me pleasure, never pain. As a preacher, I think he admired no man living or dead so much as he did the laborious and lamented John T. Johnson. He accounted it one of the chief pleasures of his life that he had been permitted to stand beside that great evangelist in the last moments of his life". Johnson took ill while preaching in Lexington, Missouri. At his bedside, in his final moment, was J.W. McGarvey and Allen Wright. It was Wright who closed the eyelids of the great preacher. Lard said of this moment, "A more worthy hand could not have performed that service."

Wright took ill while preaching at the Old Republican church. He died in 1860. H.H. Haley and J.W. McGarvey preached his funeral on that hot summer day. Lard who was away preaching at the time, later wrote, "The remains of Allen Wright lie in Lafayette county Missouri. The spot selected for his grave was a little grove in which stands a plain church where he often preached, and in which he made his last speech. In that silent wood, in the shade of that plain house, among those plain brethren, is a fitting place for the dust of plain Allen Wright to rest."

The American preacher today, who studies the lives of these early preachers, quickly realizes that we sure have it easy today. With computers, power point projection, fax machines, copiers, thousands of reference books, dozens of different Bible translations, comfortable church buildings and more support than we deserve, it humbles the modern preacher to think about the lives of Allen Wright and others. One wonders how well we would have done in similar conditions? Could the modern preacher come up with a sermon with only a Bible, pen and pad of paper and nothing else?

We can't help but also note that in our generation, there are well known preachers. They travel extensively and write in papers and publish books. Tapes of their sermons are listened to months after the sermon was first preached. But as it was in the early 1800's, today there are many good preachers who are not widely known. They are busy doing a great local work in the community they live in. They don't write books. They don't hold many meetings. But their work is making a huge impact for the kingdom of God. All this says to us is that the measure of good that a preacher does is not in how well history remembers him, or even, how wide spread his reputation is, but what he does among the people he works with.

I'm not sure what legacy, if any, that we inherit from those early "farmers by day and preachers by night" men. But through their preaching, souls in that time were saved. Sins were washed away. Families grew in the nurture of the Lord. Congregations were established. Elders were appointed. Church buildings were constructed. Truth was defended and proclaimed. People were shown the way of righteousness. Young men were encouraged to preach. Then these early preachers died. One by one, the majority of them were forgotten.

The Scriptures remind us, "*Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.*" (1 Cor. 15:58).

What legacy do current preachers have? It is not much different. Our work is to the present. The urgency upon us is now. If we only do what the majority of those early preachers did, then we have fulfilled our ministry. The difference we make is in the lives of the people we reach in this generation. Many of us today are "preachers by day and preachers by night". Our hardships may be fewer but the work is still as great. Souls need saving. Congregations need to be established. Elders need to be appointed. Brethren need to be strengthened. Young men need to be encouraged to preach. This is our work. This is our task. How blessed we are to be able to do this. God put the perfect word about His perfect Son into the hands of imperfect men.