

CU-D02

The Melodious "Liberal" from Midway by Al Maxey

The soundest wisdom comes from experience,
but there is a nearer road to it almost as
sure -- reading and reflection.

Josh Billings {1818-1885}

Dr. Lewis Letig Pinkerton

Chester Bowles (1901-1986) served as a diplomat in the administrations of several United States Presidents, including Roosevelt, Truman and Kennedy. He was Governor of Connecticut, Ambassador to India, and Undersecretary of State. He was a graduate of *Yale University* and quite a noted author. In an article for the *New Republic* dated July 22, 1946, Bowles made the following rather astute observation: "Fundamentally, liberalism is an attitude, the chief characteristics of which are human sympathy, a *receptivity to change* and a scientific willingness to follow *reason* rather than ... any fixed set of ideas." Clearly, Chester Bowles' observation is open to *debate* in both the political and religious arenas. Some see change as positive, and even necessary; others do not. Some believe one should follow reason; others find more comfort in following fixed traditions.

One man who certainly would fall under the definition of "*liberal*" as given by Bowles was **Dr. Lewis Letig Pinkerton**, who was born near Baltimore, Maryland on January 28, 1812. His father, William, was of Scotch-Irish descent, and his mother, Elizabeth, was of German descent. This Christian couple, in the near

2 generations, would produce a dozen gospel preachers: five of their sons (including Lewis), six grandsons (two of whom were sons of Lewis), and one great-grandson (the grandson of Lewis). William and Elizabeth raised their growing family on a farm (actually, several farms in Maryland, Pennsylvania and West Virginia), thus they were *all* well-accustomed to very *rigorous* work. Dr. L. L. Pinkerton would later describe much of his youth as being spent in "hard, incessant, ill-requited toil."

William was a *Presbyterian*, thus he brought up his children in the instruction of the "Decrees" of their faith's "Shorter Catechism." While still in his teens, Lewis read the entire New Testament in light of Wesley's published notes. He also chanced upon a copy of Alexander Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger*. After much study and prayer, Lewis *rejected* the Calvinistic teaching of his father; it simply was not consistent with what he himself was perceiving from his own study of the Scriptures. In September, 1830, Lewis was in the crowd as Alexander Campbell himself preached the Gospel at a nearby meeting! He was *so moved* by what he heard that day, that he approached Campbell, "made the good confession," and was immediately immersed by him.

Campbell had occasion to spend some time with this upstanding young man, and to observe the evidence of his character. Thus, Alexander Campbell later wrote this *endorsement* -- "I have *no hesitation* in recommending him to the confidence and communion of the brethren. ... I think he might be very *usefully* employed as an evangelist." Campbell wasn't the only leader in our faith-heritage who took notice of Dr. L. L. Pinkerton. Over the years Lewis also had the privilege of being associated with such legends of faith as Walter Scott, John T. Johnson, and William Morton. Indeed, the *second* of these leaders would later write, "He is destined to do *much good* if he lives. I could sit and listen to him all the time." He also described him as an "earnest, eloquent, devoted and successful evangelist."

Before any of these accolades, however, the young Lewis Pinkerton had a decision to make. He was near the end of his teen years, he had rejected the teachings of his father's religion, and he had embraced the truths proclaimed by Alexander Campbell as *better* representing his own convictions regarding God's will. Now, what was he to do with himself? In 1831 he decided to leave West Virginia. After traveling through and visiting several different communities, he finally *settled* in Trenton, Ohio. Here he found employment as a teacher, and he also began his studies in medicine. Although he continued to study the Scriptures, and to meditate upon them, his primary focus at this time was in becoming a physician.

From 1831-1838 he both studied and practiced medicine in Ohio, the latter few years in Carthage, Ohio, the location where Walter Scott labored for the Lord. On March 19, 1833, Lewis married **Sarah A. Ball**, with whom he enjoyed *42 years* of wedded bliss!! They had *nine children* together, although *two* died in infancy. Even though Dr. Lewis Pinkerton had a *thriving* and *lucrative* medical practice by this time, he was *also* becoming noted for his *speaking* abilities. A member of the congregation at which Walter Scott preached, he had a number of occasions to *preach*, and his lessons were very well-received. In May, 1838, at the encouragement of a great *many* people, Walter Scott among them, Dr. L. L. Pinkerton sold his practice and entered into the work of an evangelist. It was a bold, courageous move; a genuine commitment of faith in the leading of God's Spirit.

In the fall of that same year Pinkerton made his first trip into Kentucky, spending a good many months holding evangelistic meetings. In the spring and summer of the following year (1839) he made his way into Indiana and Ohio. He was so enthralled with the possibilities in *Kentucky*, however, that in December, 1839 he and his family relocated to Jefferson County, Kentucky, making it their new home. It is estimated that in the next couple of years he baptized several *thousand* people at his Gospel meetings. In the

4 summer of 1840, Lewis became the preacher for the church at New Union, KY. The following fall (October, 1841) he became the minister for the church in Lexington, KY. In late 1844 he relocated to Midway, KY. Here he would spend the next 15-16 years of his life preaching and teaching. After just ten years there, the congregation grew from 32 members to around 168, the vast majority of whom Dr. L. L. Pinkerton himself had converted to Jesus Christ. With regard to this loving assembly of believers, J. T. Johnson, who was intimately connected with it and Pinkerton, wrote, "If I wished to witness a specimen of primitive Christianity in its modesty, humility, piety, simplicity, order, devotion, intelligence and liberality in Christian enterprise in providing for the poor, the church at Midway would claim my attention."

Dr. L. L. Pinkerton had a "deep concern for social action," one which he was most certainly not afraid to display regardless of popular opinion. "He championed the causes of temperance and abolitionism," for example [*The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, p. 598]. While ministering in Midway, Lewis himself came up with the idea of a school for female orphans, because "at this time, girls were taught to read only so that they could read to their children when they became mothers. Female *orphans* were not even recipients of *this* basic knowledge and were *usually* destined for a life as a maid or laborer.

As a *solution* to this situation, Pinkerton proposed a plan to educate these women in the liberal arts and to graduate teachers" [*ibid*, p. 517]. "When ***Kentucky Female Orphan School*** opened its door on October 3, 1847, there were *fourteen students* ranging in age from 3-15. The school had already received publicity through the *Millennial Harbinger*, and Alexander Campbell had praised Pinkerton and the motivation behind the school" [*ibid*]. Today this noble institution is known as **[Midway College](#)**, and it's still affiliated with the *Stone-Campbell Movement* (by the way, check out some great historical photos at their web site).

This great man also loved to write; to share his thoughts with all who might be willing to listen. In Midway he edited and published a monthly magazine known as *The Christian Mirror*. Later he edited publications such as *The Christian Age* and *The New Era*, the latter of which was a temperance paper that came out of Lexington. He also was senior editor of *The Ecclesiastic Reformer*. Some have declared him to be "one of the *most accomplished writers* within the ranks" of our movement. His scholarship was evident in his writings, and in his earlier years he was offered the presidency of a number of colleges. He always declined, preferring to work among the people for *reform* of society and *transformation* of hearts. A biographer of Dr. Pinkerton summed it up rather well, saying, "He is distinguished for great independence of character, and, on this account, his actions are not always well understood."

Dr. Pinkerton was also a strong advocate for the oppressed black slaves, and was outspoken in his hatred for slavery. This did not win him many friends in the deep south. Yet, he would not be stopped, and so he "established an independent congregation for slaves in Midway, Kentucky, in 1852" [*ibid*, p. 597]. When the *Civil War* broke out, Lewis Pinkerton took the side of the Union against the Confederacy, and dislike for him became even more pronounced. When Gen. Bragg entered Kentucky, he accepted an appointment as their surgeon and chaplain.

When the *white* churches increasingly closed their doors to him, he devoted himself instead to mission work among the freed, but still impoverished, *blacks* of central Kentucky. Many of their churches today owe their *roots* to the work of Dr. L. L. Pinkerton, who was far more interested in a man's *heart* than his *skin*. Because many of the whites in the churches had turned against him, refusing to allow him to preach from their pulpits, and because the blacks were much too *poor* to support his ministry, Pinkerton spent a number of years with little income. Yet, he persisted in his work. In recognition of his sterling character,

6 however, President U. S. Grant stepped in and appointed him Special Mail Agent in June, 1873. During the performing of his duties the next year (October, 1874), Dr. Pinkerton came down with a *very serious* affliction from which he could not recover. He passed from this life on his 63rd birthday: January 28, 1875. His final words were, "My Savior, my Savior, the Lord Jesus." He was buried in the Lexington cemetery.

James A. Garfield, who just six years later would take office as President of the United States, and who would be assassinated after only four months, and who was also connected with our faith-heritage, eulogized Lewis Pinkerton with these words, "Dr. Pinkerton belonged to that small class of men whose *characters* are much more the result of *inherent qualities* than of *external circumstances*. He possessed an intellect of remarkable clearness and strength. In his religious opinions, two ideas possessed and controlled him: his strong conception of the ineffable *majesty* and *justice* of God, and his abiding trust in the condescension and love of Christ. He was a man of a most *positive* and *intense* nature; his opinions were *convictions*. In social life, in the sweet companionship of books and friends, his spirit shone with the gentle tenderness and sweetness of a woman's nature. I have seen but very few men to whom children were so strongly attracted. In his nature was a rarest combination of independence, strength, courage, severity, gentleness, inflexible persistence, affectionate tenderness, sadness and mirth, I have ever known."

A friend of his, Thomas D. Butler, observed, "Dr. Pinkerton was one of the manliest, purest, most self-sacrificing, and, therefore, most Christ-like of men. His moral qualities were quick and sturdy, and, like Paul, he was *immovably fixed* for truth and righteousness. **While he looked up to no man, he never looked down upon any!!** He was the *impartial friend* of his fellow-man." Prof. Shackelford, his almost daily companion for ten years, his biographer, and the man who preached his funeral, said of his friend, "His practical and ardent sympathy with the poor and

wretched was a leading trait in his character. The *cry* of distress was to him the *call* of God. He had great sympathy with women in all their peculiar trials and sorrows, and all little children loved him."

Scaring the Rats from Worship

Sadly, and this will most likely surprise a number of you, the ultra-conservatives and legalistic patternists within our movement are completely oblivious to *any* of the above information regarding this good man's life. Most could not have told you about a single item that you just read. Worse--these people, frankly, *couldn't care less* about any of these loving acts of self-sacrifice by this devoted disciple. They know the name Dr. L. L. Pinkerton, and the church in Midway, Kentucky, for one thing, and one thing *only*--'Twas *here* that *this man* introduced a *melodeon* into the worship assembly on a Sunday in the year 1860. As far as these rigid legalists are concerned, that marked the precise moment the gates of hell were flung open and the full weight of the forces of evil was unleashed upon the *One True Church*.

John Waddey, in an online article about Dr. Pinkerton titled *An Early Change Agent*, wrote, "He was truly *the grandfather* of our current generation of change agents. They have copied his agenda almost 'to a T.' They should be rejected as was he." Yes, Waddey *does mention* several of the *good* things Dr. Pinkerton did, but they apparently *mean nothing* in light of "his heretical views of things sacred."

What "heretical views"? He saw nothing wrong with instrumental accompaniment to our worshipful singing. "He claimed to belong to the church universal and was responsible to no particular congregation." Oh my goodness!! And they didn't burn him at the stake?! He even believed--hold on tightly--that various bodies of disciples could *cooperate* in various ministries and mission efforts, and even organize themselves to do so (the *American Christian Missionary Society*, for example). Clearly, the raging fires of

8 hell will *never* be stoked hot enough for the likes of the heretic Dr. L. L. Pinkerton (or, so say the legalists). ***What Garbage!!***

Yes, it is true--Dr. Pinkerton decided to introduce a melodeon into the "worship service" of the church at Midway. Why? Because, in Pinkerton's own words, the singing of the brethren was so *deplorable* that it would "**scare even the rats from worship.**" I've been in congregations like that, and I'm sure you have too. I've actually had people tell me over the years that they would never "place membership" in a particular congregation because the singing there was absolutely atrocious.

Whether we like to admit it or not, our singing has a tremendous impact upon the dynamic of the entire assembly and everything that happens within it. If it is poorly done, it can bring everything else down with it. That is simply a fact, and those with any "smarts" will deal with this matter, rather than ignoring it. Dr. L. L. Pinkerton simply chose to try and deal with the matter in a way that would *benefit* the brethren in their singing, *encourage* and *inspire* the seeking as they came to experience the worship of the saints, and *glorify* the Father of them all.

Since not a single, solitary sentence anywhere in all of Scripture even remotely *hints* at God's disapproval of instrumental accompaniment to singing, and since one **can** find plenty of passages in both O.T. and N.T. documents that quite clearly and without even a trace of equivocation, declare God's **approval**, Dr. Pinkerton had no reason whatsoever to believe he was acting "heretically" or contrary to God's declared will with regard to worshipful expression.

Although some like to blame the instrumentalists, or even the *instrument itself*, for the ultimate dividing of the *Stone-Campbell Movement* (one writer wrote about this melodeon, now on display at *Midway College*, "Many people travel long distances to see the little instrument that split a church"), while others blame those who demand strict observance of and submission to perceived precept (drawn entirely from personal assumption), neither side

is entirely right. Yes, there have been, and continue to be, obstinate *opinionists* on both sides of the issue, and such persons will often allow their opinions to run roughshod over others (even to the sundering of relationships), which, by the way, is the *literal* definition of the concept of the Greek term we have rendered "heresy."

The tiny wooden *melodeon* did **not** divide the movement, however, although divisive disciples used it, along with other things such as missionary societies, to *justify* their separation from one another. Division was in the works for our movement *long before* these "issues" ever came along, and that division was tied *more* to what was happening in our nation at this point in our history than to various petty particulars tied to Sunday singing and daily evangelizing. The United States--our beloved Union--was being rapidly torn asunder by various social tensions that would, in time, lead to the War Between the States. For those willing to do the study, one can make a very strong case for the split in the *Stone-Campbell Movement* following closely the lines of demarcation between the states!!

Rick Atchley, in his DVD titled "***Learning Division***," has done a superb job of documenting this evidence. If you have never seen this DVD, go to your phone and call the [**Richland Hills Church of Christ**](#) (where Rick preaches) and order it. It is a *must* see, and also a real eye-opener. I was genuinely privileged to have breakfast one morning with Rick Atchley this past March at ***The Tulsa Workshop*** (at which he and I were both speakers). Since we were staying in the same hotel, Rick asked me to meet him in the lobby so that we could spend some time together getting to know one another better. I mentioned to him this particular DVD presentation, and how it had *impacted so many lives*, and we had a good visit about it. I regard it as one of the most important sermons delivered within the *Stone-Campbell Movement*.

The *true* nature of the division that occurred in the *Stone-Campbell Movement* was far more *philosophical* in nature--it was

10 over how one perceived God, how one perceived the church, and how one went about establishing *authority*. It had to do with one's approach to biblical interpretation, and how one's understandings were to be *implemented* and even *imposed*.

And, as history shows, many of these philosophical approaches were drawn along the lines of North and South in our nation in the latter half of the 19th century. "By the end of the 1880s the majority of the Stone-Campbell churches in the *North* favored instruments" [*Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, p. 415]. "The *a cappella* practice, in turn, became part of the identity of the largely *Southern* Churches of Christ" [*ibid*].

In a great many ways, religious thinking *mirrored* the thinking of the divided nation, and it is no surprise that in a number of movements within Christendom in our nation division was the result. "Instrumental music and the missionary society became divisive only after it became apparent that the Stone-Campbell Movement contained two irreconcilable traditions: one defined by *ecumenical progressivism* and the other by *sectarian primitivism*" [*ibid*, p. 417]. The *latter* group, hermeneutically, believed that if the Scriptures were *silent* about the practice of something, then that practice was to be *avoided*. To practice it would be "Sin."

Those *less* legalistic in their approach to Scripture, felt that "silence" neither *prescribed* nor *proscribed* anything, but merely called for disciples to *examine* all such things carefully and prayerfully; *lovingly* and responsibly; acting ultimately in the best interests of God (is He *glorified* by said practice?), the saints (are they *edified* by said practice?), and the lost (are they *evangelized* by said practice?).

"Silence" is not a license to do as one pleases. Far from it. But, neither is it a LAW that forever limits, restricts and prohibits. For those of the former philosophy, the melodeon was simply an aid/accompaniment to *heartfelt praise*; for the latter philosophy, the melodeon was an idol that had totally negated worship. **John Waddey** declared that it is "viewed as Aaron's golden calf by

those who are committed to doing Bible things in Bible ways." Frankly, had it not been the melodeon or missionary societies, it would have been something else. The *real* division had already occurred in the hearts of the people--they were merely looking for a visible focal point ... and they found it.

So, as history records, Dr. L. L. Pinkerton introduced a melodeon into the worship at Midway, Kentucky. This didn't just suddenly happen, however. Nor was the use of an instrument the *first* thing Lewis thought of to try and *improve* the singing of the congregation. Indeed, it wasn't *his* idea initially at all. For a time, he invited the members (as many as wanted) to meet in a private home on Saturday evening to practice the songs for the next day. To set the proper pitch for the hymns, they would use a little melodeon. In time, some of the women in the congregation who could play would *accompany* the *practice* singing with the melodeon.

The group meeting in the home was so impressed with how much this improved their singing that they asked their preacher (Dr. L. L. Pinkerton) if he thought it would be okay for them to bring the melodeon with them to the building the next day for the worship assembly. He told them he saw no *biblical* problem with such a thing, so they did so. A man by the name of Thompson Parish *played* the instrument as the congregation *sang* their hymns from the depths of their *hearts* to their Father and one another. It seemed the rats didn't need to flee anymore!

As is often the case, however, when any significant change occurs in the *traditional* way a "worship service" (a phrase never found in Scripture) is conducted, even though many may be spiritually uplifted, a few will always find fault. They may realize they don't have the numbers with them to stop what they "don't like," and they may realize that they don't even have any Scripture to support their dislike (which is why they will often *flee* from dialogue with you about the matter), but this won't stop them from *opposing* it.

12 At Midway there was a man named **Adam Hibler** (one of the *elders*, in fact) who was *not happy* about the addition of the melodeon. His solution to the "problem" was to go to the church building late one night with his black slave named Reuben (hmmm ... he opposed the instrument, but he owned slaves?!). While the elder held one of the windows open, his slave entered the building and handed the little melodeon out to Hibler (he referred to the instrument as "the instrument of Satan"), who then took an axe and chopped the instrument to pieces on the front lawn.

The people of the congregation were furious that someone would *dare to do* such a thing, so they got a new melodeon and placed it in the building. *Again*, late one night, Adam Hibler and his slave Reuben went and got the melodeon, this time hiding it in his barn. A third melodeon was purchased and placed in the building. It became obvious that this was the desire of the majority of the congregation. This time, though, the instrument remained. Many years later the building burned to the ground with the third instrument in it. Later, when Hibler's barn was being cleaned out, the second melodeon was found hidden there!!

This instrument was cleaned up, and it is now on display inside a protective glass case within the library of *Midway College*. The destroyed church building was *rebuilt*, and the brand new auditorium at the Midway church building was dedicated in 1896. It contains a nice *stained-glass* window bearing the image of Dr. Lewis L. Pinkerton. John Waddey had this to say about that: "To this day, those who visit the church can see the doctor, looking over the congregation he made famous by his disobedience to Christ's will."

Good Grief!
