

PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS

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The history of ancestors, however humble, is generally interesting to their posterity.

This consideration will perhaps excuse me in recording some particulars of my past life. And the narrative must be given from memory, since I never kept a diary.

Ancestors

My grandfather, David Ralston, was a native of Ireland, immigrated to America before the Revolutionary War, and married Mary Reid from Scotland. They reared seven sons and one daughter, of whom my father, James Ralston, was the second. The old gentleman survived his wife some twenty years or more, and died at the ripe old age of about one hundred years.

My maternal grandfather was Samuel Shannon, from whom I inherited the appellation S.S. He was a Pennsylvanian, passed over into Virginia, m. Jane Reid, and they reared seven sons and four daughters. My maternal uncles were large athletic men. The older ones took part in the revolutionary struggle and also most of them endured the hardships incident to the settlement of the family in Tennessee. The conflict with the Indian tribes was both sanguinary and of long continuance. These uncles and two of my maternal aunts reared large families, who have scattered far beyond my knowledge.

My father was born in Pennsylvania in 1781, and whilst a schoolboy the family removed to the vicinity of Nashville, Tenn. He was a large portly man, of grave aspect but very genial temperament. Being an old Seceder, he and others by application obtained from Scotland Rev. Wm. Hume as pastor. He had the reputation of being a very pious good man.

My Infancy

I was born the 11th day of May, 1809, in the vicinity of Nashville, and now, Dec. 25, 1866, I am in my 58th year. So fleet is time! Baptized by father Hume, I was taken by my parents at two years of age to Lincoln County, Tenn., then a wilderness. When settlers came in we were surrounded by a kind hearted neighborly people; but chiefly an irreligious class of little culture. I was the eldest of six children, three sons and three daughters. My brothers David and John, and sister Mary, all have become heads of families, and still remain in Tennessee. But my two sisters, Jane and Katherine Ann, both died single.

My earliest recollections were waked up by the earthquakes of 1811-12. It may seem incredible that I should remember events that occurred before I was quite three years old. But those frequent and long continued shocks of mother earth that threatened to overturn our houses, made a deep impression upon every mind; and I am fully persuaded that I still recollect those scenes of horror.

The new country was quite hilly and rocky, was heavily timbered and was covered with tall cane. It abounded in springs and caverns---a romantic region well calculated to awaken the feelings of my brothers and myself. The hills we climbed, the rocks we rolled down precipices, and the chestnuts we gathered, seem as things of yesterday. I

cannot imagine what I should do with boyhood in the smooth monotonous prairies of Iowa; though these luxuriant prairies are very pleasing now.

Schoolboy Days

The primitive school houses of Tennessee were very poor structures: and the schools corresponded to the character of the buildings. Nothing was taught beyond the primary rudiments, and these but imperfectly. Our time was divided between labor, study and play. The facilities for study were very limited, and "labor saving machines" in the modern sense, had not been thought of. As for play, the genuine article needs no fictitious helps, such as gymnastics now propose. Play is by far the sweetest, when boys spring forth into the forest without the trappings of art. Hence, in view of the impediments to labor and study, and the native access to play, it is not strange that we were most fond of the latter. When I think of the hills, rocks, roots and stumps, amongst which I wrought, I sometimes wonder that I did not contract an utter aversion to manual labor with the poor implements we used. No doubt such would have been the result had not custom interspersed liberal seasons of play for relaxation.

Our Sabbaths

Surrounded by an irreligious community, church going was not to be enjoyed except

when we went into other neighborhoods several miles distant; even then not much to edification, except occasionally. Our Sabbaths were generally spent at home; and reading was the common exercise. The Westminster Catechism was taught, the Bible studied, and books, such as Harvey's, Boston's, Bunyan's, etc., were read. Of religious newspapers we had none. My neighboring schoolmates were accustomed to spend the Sabbath in running over the neighborhood at all manner of sports; and they often tried to allure my brothers and myself to like indulgence---persuasion and scorn were alternately brought to bear upon us, but thanks to a guardian Providence our parents were firm in opposing our participation in such indulgences. In fact, I was never greatly moved at the ridicule of those wicked boys. This was greatly owing to the influence exercised by my father. His education was but limited, but he read much and had a good understanding. His neighbors regarded him with deference. He was their counselor, wrote their documents, presided in their litigations, bled their sick, and m. their sons and daughters. Seeing the deference shown him in other respects I never doubted his superiority in religious matters also. Happily, I was decidedly impressed with the correctness of his religious views and practice long before I had any adequate understanding of their meaning. I could therefore afford to

despise the sneers of boys that had been brought up like the wild ass colt.

My mother, whose name was Esther, was a woman of very meek, tender, and amiable disposition. Her tears had a most subduing influence over me. Tears! Yes, my folly often brought tears from her eyes profusely. And thus, by the divine blessing on paternal firmness and maternal tenderness, my early life was molded amid surroundings the most forbidding.

Youthful Experience

In my earliest reading of the Bible, I relished most its stirring narratives, and sublime imagery. Bunyan's "Pilgrim Progress" and his "Holy War" were also great favorites long before the spirituality of their meaning was understood. Away with the idea that children should not read anything not understood. Those inimitable allegories were indelibly fixed on my memory, as they never could have been at a later period; and they were found eminently useful as the understanding became more mature. Subsequently, I became much interested in the Doctrines of Grace, as taught in the Bible and explained in the writings of old divines. Harvey's Theron and Aspasio was then highly relished for the spirit of its discussions and the aptitude of its illustrations.

The professing people, with whom I then came in contact, were generally of the

Arminian creed. And the custom of those days encouraged religious disputations. Such disputes were often long and loud, and very well calculated to stir up warmth of feeling. Young as I was, I often entered the list in favor of Calvinism. Though I subsequently became disgusted with the heat and bitterness often stirred up by those religious contentions, and became quite averse to such displays. In fact, I am conscious of having lapsed into the very opposite extreme, and have too often refrained when I should have contended for truth.

At an early period of life I often experienced very lively emotions, which led me to meditation and prayer. In the privacy of such exercises, deep solicitude, hope, peace and joy were often experienced. But I never could revert to any definite period when these exercises had their beginning. There was indeed one day of my youthful history, that calls for special acknowledgments of gratitude. In a grove of dense foliage, I was one of a large audience that listened to an able minister of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. He was solemn, and in my apprehension, very eloquent. His lecture was founded on Isa. 63:1-5. The subject itself is truly sublime; and the speaker seemed to rise grandly beyond the things of earth; as he set forth the sovereignty, the majesty, passion, and victorious conquest of the Redeemer. I seemed to behold the Lamb of God. I had

never seen Him before, and the impressions were no less abiding than deep. I was then about sixteen or seventeen years of age; and though the language was not retained the impressions are still vivid, far more so than anything ever heard before or since, even the latest. Was that the day of my regeneration? I am not prepared to decide. I had often previously experienced very lively emotions. But to me this was the great day of the feast. I seemed to realize manifestations more elevating and abiding than ever before.

Ministerial Calling

In my eighteenth year I became impressed with an inclination to the ministerial office and a strong conviction of duty in that direction. This impression was not a mere sudden and ephemeral impulse, but a deep and abiding conviction. My situation was such as almost to preclude a reasonable hope of success, nevertheless, I never tried to cast off the sense of duty. Yet circumstances were such as to bar the way to an immediate consecration to the requisite preparation. My father had but a short time previous moved to the vicinity of Memphis, Tenn.; had bought land partly on credit, and then for the first time in life began to have many sore visitations in the way of malignant fevers. I was his principal dependence for paying his indebtedness. To have left the family then seemed likely to involve them in ruin. To

have communicated my dilemma to my parents would have given them much trouble at the thought of my detention. Hence my convictions were pent up in my own bosom for about three years before I communicated to any person. My father's indebtedness having been paid; the family returned to Middle Tennessee where they had always enjoyed good health. This done I informed my parents of my convictions of duty and purpose to comply. As I had anticipated, they were both surprised and deeply affected on hearing my story. They expressed their sore regrets that so much time had been lost, and that even then they were not in situation to render me pecuniary assistance. But with feeling natural to parents, they bade me God speed, hoping that Providence would open up some practicable way to success.

Education Sought

When I was about eighteen years of age my father gave me a very promising colt of fine blood. This being all the property I owned it was cared for very closely, in the fond hope that with the price of a fine horse I might be able to make a small start toward an education. But it was the mysterious will of God to cut off that sole visible dependence. At about two years old the colt died, a very heavy loss to a boy, who had nothing more to lose. The colt having been purposely consecrated to the prosecution of the anticipated education;

this providential dispensation seemed inscrutable.

In that inland region far from market, money had always been comparatively scarce during my early life. Prior to maturity I never possessed more than ten dollars all told. And, when leaving my father's house to seek an education, I had barely fifty cents! The first effort was to get employment in a common school. But so stringent were the times, and so indifferent were the parents that this effort failed. As an alternative I engaged to serve a farmer for one month, and I did him a faithful month's work for \$9. At the expiration of the month, I went to my uncle, Wm. Ralston, and studied with him for a few months, when Rev. Henry Bryson of Lincoln County sent me a very liberal proposition to give me both tuition and boarding gratuitously. This seemed to me a very providential opening toward the attainment of my fond purpose, and the proposition was thankfully accepted.

Education Prosecuted

Mr. Bryson was a pious and very zealous minister of the Associate Reformed Church. My arrival at his house marked a new era in the history of my existence. Up to that time I had no favorable opportunity of uniting with the church, not having access to any of the Psalm singing

denominations. But then I was admitted to the fellowship of Doctor Bryson's people.

I then commenced to study Latin, and after considerable progress had been made I commenced Greek and some of the sciences in connection. In the prosecution of ministerial and pastoral duties my benefactor was often so much engaged as to preclude my recitations, which operated unfavorably. Moreover, it was very unfavorable to have no fellow student for conference and fraternal criticism. I had no promptings to emulation, and no favorable opportunity to cultivate the art of public speaking. These hindrances were sorely felt. My progress seemed slow, and I had an uneasy apprehension that my attainments were not very thorough. But these disadvantages were to a great extent compensated by the social privileges enjoyed with my preceptor and his admirable lady. No portion of my life was ever spent more pleasantly or profitably to myself. Thought often reverts to the time of that sojourn with grateful feelings.

To remedy some of the evils connected with the privacy of my studies, I spent nearly two sessions at Jackson College; the expenses of which were paid by my father. Next, I taught a common school for a few months, and then spent a year with Rev. Robert Galloway, during part of which time I assisted him in teaching, but studied most of the time.

I had read about the usual amount of Latin and Greek, but had attained comparatively little proficiency in Mathematics, when through the representations of Dr. Bryson, I was taken under the care of Presbytery, in so far as to have a text assigned to me on which to deliver a discourse at the next annual meeting. This was unexpected to me, and I greatly feared that I was being put forward beyond the measure of my attainments. Whilst still prosecuting my literary course, I prepared the prescribed sermon on the most difficult subject, Moral Inability. At the proper time I appeared before Presbytery, and delivered my discourse as best I could; and so much to the satisfaction of the Presbytery, that I was directed to commence the study of Theology forthwith under the tuition of my benefactor, Dr. Bryson. Once more I became an inmate of his hospitable house, had the use of his books, and received his instructions. The year was spent very laboriously in reading Ridgeley's Body of Divinity, Dwight's study of the Scriptures; and in church History, Milner's History, Prideaux's Connections, Shuckford, etc. I also wrote a sermon or a lecture on the several leading subjects of Theology, in order as they are set forth in our Confession of Faith. This made the fourth year that I spent with Dr. Bryson gratuitously. He was indeed a benefactor, a revered father.

At the next fall meeting of Synod, the Theological Seminary at Due West Corner,

South Carolina, was started into existence, and I was the first theological student to arrive at the appointed place. Laughland McDonald arrived soon after; and rooming together we shared the instructions of Rev. E. E. Pressly. McDonald was a very companionable young man, full of vivacity and peasantry. And Dr. Pressly did everything in his power to render us comfortable and happy.

Then it was that I commenced the study of Hebrew in addition to the prosecution of studies already mentioned. Feeling that much was still to be accomplished, I overtaxed myself both by day and night. Dr. Pressly gave me repeated warnings to danger to my health but I did not profit by his well-timed admonitions. I had been a close laborious student for years without apparent injury. My constitution seemed better than ordinary, and I thought there could be no danger in the few remaining months. The consequence was that in February dyspepsia gripped me like a giant, and I was compelled to relinquish my studies. Most of all did I regret to give up Hebrew, which was not matured, so as to enable me to retain it until health was restored.

Dr. Pressly had a great fondness for figurative passages of Scripture, and was very ready in discovering the apparent subjects of allusion. He exercised us freely in this department of sacred literature. It

was his custom every week to point out some highly figurative passage for our examination, on which we were required to extemporize alternately in a colloquial recitation. We consulted commentaries and other available helps, and were seldom able to advance anything beyond what was borrowed from those authors. After our little shock had been exhausted, then came the Doctor's turn; and we were often surprised at his stores of originality, which seemed very simple and natural. The presumption is that he generally selected figures in relation to which he had arrived at some original thoughts. To my mind these lessons opened up a new field of study. It became evident that in very many instances expositors had failed to present the most satisfactory interpretations of prophetic symbols. And it was found that patient and laborious thought was necessary to the acquisition of satisfactory views on such passages. But when anything new was arrived at, it brought with it a thrill of gratification. I became very fond of these exercises; but did not then dream that I was laying the foundation for the study of prophecy, which abounds in figures. The example of Dr. Pressly did much to emancipate my mind from a servile dependence on expositors, however valuable they are as helps. In the figurative portions of Scripture are to be found many rich veins of sacred lore that have never been properly developed.

Time of Probation

Being an invalid far from home, with little apparent prospect of recovery, I resolved on returning to my father's house, that I might die there, but I started in company with several ministers, who were on their way to a meeting of Presbytery in Newton County, Georgia. After several days of travel on horseback with cheerful companions, my deep gloom had partially worn off, and the Presbytery proposed to give me license to preach, and to send me on a mission amongst the vacant congregations, in the fond hope that such exercise might improve my health. Accordingly, I was licensed to preach the everlasting gospel on the 6th of May, 1837, five days before I completed my 28th year. This done, I received a series of presbyterial appointments extending over several months, which required me to return to South and North Carolinas. Though feeble I continued to preach every Sabbath, until toward the last of August, when my health had become so poor that I was advised to desist. And then, weak as I was, I resolved to return home that I might die there. The kind people for whom I had been laboring, regarded this resolve as little better than suicide, supposing that I would die by the way. To perform a journey of nearly 400 miles on horseback, and alone, was indeed a great undertaking. But I committed my case to the Lord, with far more than ordinary earnestness, and I was

undoubtedly heard in the time of need. God perfected strength in my weakness. Throughout the journey I seemed to realize the interpositions of a merciful Providence every day, and in due time I was in the midst of sympathizing friends at home.

On reaching home I learned that my dear mother had died but a few days before. This was a sore disappointment to me. In my feeble state nothing could have been more gratifying than to have met my kind hearted mother. During the seven years spent in study my mother and sisters had made nearly all the clothing I had worn. I went to Jackson College in a beautiful suit of mixed jeans of domestic manufacture. And I confess to a feeling of no little pride, when in reply to inquires as to where I had obtained it, I responded that my mother and sisters made it at home. My trial discourses were delivered in clothing of their handiwork, and finally I was licensed to preach in similar attire. As that venerable mother spend hour after hour in drawing out the threads, she thought much of my distant prospects; and she had a great anxiety to hear my pulpit performance. Yet in the mysterious allotments of Providence she was not spared to hear the son she had reared.

By the commencement of the ensuing winter my health had very much improved, and I started on a missionary tour of six months through the new settlements of

Alabama, Mississippi, "West Tennessee" and Kentucky. I found myself amongst strangers throughout this excursion, but was everywhere received with demonstrations of kind regard. The people seemed gospel hungry, and I felt it a privilege to preach, though it was generally done in their dwellings, sometimes in school houses or court houses, but only once in a church during the half year. The country being new, the roads were very little improved, the streams were often high and the muddy swamps very deep. Hence my journeys on horseback were very laborious, and often dangerous, but in the good providence of God I was preserved and prospered.

Pastoral Settlement and Marriage

A small congregation, Head spring, had been organized within a few miles of my youthful home, and for several years had been under the pastoral care of my preceptor, Dr. Bryson; and Zion was a very small society that had been organized as an off-shoot of Bethel congregation. These people gave me a call to become their pastor, and I accepted chiefly because the call was subscribed by a number of my old neighbors and school mates, as adherents though not members.

About the same time, June 6, 1838, I was married to Mary Ann Hill. She proved to be an industrious, economical and agreeable companion. She soon enlisted

the affections of the people, and was highly esteemed for her amiable qualities. In that place three children were given us, Mary Jane, Martha, and Robert Shannon.

Amongst that people I encountered many difficulties, and had also many encouragements. The people, even the elders, had been poorly trained in early life, and amongst them there were none of extensive influence. This was found to be a great defect, for which there was nothing to compensate. Worse still, there were not a few whose influence proved positively injurious to the cause. Ardent spirits had not been banished from the church, and I had some trouble on that score. But of all the evils there encountered, the tongue proved to be the worst. Backbiting and strife prevailed to the distraction of the little society, but for the untoward.

Influence of this despicable vice there were many encouragements to hope for success. Large audiences attended my ministrations. There was a large attendance from non-professional families, many of whom I had known from my youth. Not a few of these evinced a lively interest. In those days my feelings were easily moved, far more emotional than of late years; and I was often moved by seeing some of my auditors in tears. Some few of my old non-professing friends were enlisted and made a public profession, and others would in all probability have done so but for the

forbidding influence of talkers. At length I became so discouraged at the prevalence of scandal as to resolve on seeking a new field of labor, and after some hesitation I accepted a call to serve the congregation of Mt. Zion in Lincoln County, Missouri, in the autumn of 1843. That was a time of great pecuniary depression. It was almost impracticable to sell anything for money, and in making removal we made an almost complete sacrifice of the household furniture we had been able to gather.

The New Pastorate

In addition to Mt. Zion, already named, a little society at Buffalo in Pike County, obtained one-fourth of my time for a few years. Mt. Zion having engaged but one-half of my time, one-fourth was left vacant, and was chiefly spent in missionating over Callaway, Audrian, and Monroe Counties.

After a few years the little society at Buffalo became distracted, and in a great measure disorganized by the strife of two prominent members. Being brothers-in-law, their contentions were like the bars of a castle. I tried for a year to effect the restoration of order and quiet to the distracted society, but all in vain, I was compelled to give them up.

At Mt. Zion I had a small congregation (34 members at first) of very interesting people. In point of intelligence and salutary influence they constituted the best

neighborhood in the county. This afforded a very delightful contrast to the society I had left. My opportunities were, however, very much circumscribed. Other denominations divided the population all around me, and my audiences were by no means so large as in Tennessee. The increase was chiefly from the youth of our own families; yet the youth of those days were so well disposed that in the course of a few years our number had doubled

In the spring of 1845, my wife's health began to decline under consumption. On the first day of July, she gave birth to our youngest son, James. The child was also taken sick when but a few days old, and was reduced to so low a state that death seemed inevitable. Both visitors and physicians were much astonished at his recovery, his reviving seemed to indicate the visit of an angel. Yet he was very feeble for a long time after. His mother grew worse from the time of his birth, and continued to sink under a severe cough until her death on the 28th of August. She was demented for some time before her departure, in consequence of which I could have very little satisfaction in conversing with her in the near prospect of death.

Our situation was then a pitiable one. Yet Providence did provide for our necessities. Mr. Jas. Alexander had married Miss Agnes Shannon, a distant relative of my own, and their own house not being built, I

prevailed on them to move into my house and take charge of my children. Mrs. Alexander was one of the kindest of women, and she was indefatigable in her attentions, but her health was feeble, and the care and solicitude was too great for her strength. I did what I could to lighten the burden, but still her health seemed likely to fail. Such were the circumstances which induced me to seek relief by another change of relation before the year of bereavement had quite expired. On the 6th of June, 1846, I married Miss Sarah Yeagle. She was a pious and good woman, a faithful wife and a godmother to my children. Her education was limited, but she was a woman of far more than ordinary judgment. I was largely indebted to her for the measure of success in life that Providence willed me. For seventeen years I continued to serve the good people of Mt. Zion. These years were thickly set with diversified trials. Connected as I was with the Kentucky Presbytery, from three to four hundred miles from my Presbyterian brethren, I felt lonely and much in need of fraternal sympathy and counsel. The congregation being small and solitary, my little influence was circumscribed to narrow bounds. My pecuniary support was entirely inadequate, and I was compelled to supply the deficiency as best I could. Yet I did not feel at liberty to leave so long as there were evidences of usefulness in store for a future day. Trying as were those

years, they were comparatively happy. The people were generally harmonious among themselves, and they seemed to appreciate my services. Hence, I held on despite my difficulties. The "border troubles" in Kansas dissatisfied me very much. I felt inclined to leave, but could not readily decide what was duty in the case. Eventually I was so unhappy as to offend a prominent member of the congregation. I humbled myself before him more than once, but the wound could not be permanently healed. The time to leave seemed to have come and I did so with reluctance for I felt strongly attached to the people.

The Pastorate in Iowa

On removing to Iowa, I passed from the Associate Reformed to the United Presbyterian Church and took charge of the congregation of LeClaire Praire in Scott County, Iowa, and of the Pleasant Unity congregation in Rock Island County, Illinois, giving two-thirds of my time to the former and one-third to the latter place. This arrangement required the crossing of the river to and fro at regular periods, and frequently with considerable risk, when the ice was weak. At Pleasant Unity my services seemed barren of results, and I was convinced that my services might be more profitable if spent at the one place. With the acquiescence of the Pleasant Unity congregation I was released, and afterward

devoted my time entirely to the one congregation.

In my new position success seemed to crown my efforts. The congregation grew steadily, and my audiences were swelled by outsiders. The youth were generally well disposed, and made professions in early life. There were exceptions to this general fact, to my sorrow there were some who stood aloof from the church. Moreover, we had frequently to suffer loss by removals, families going west in search of cheap lands. Nevertheless, we had a steady support from yearly accessions.

During most of these years my support from the congregation was insufficient. In my former charge the support was altogether inadequate and I was compelled to supplement my little salary by teaching, and partly by manual labor, not by tent-making, but in employment more laborious. At the death of my father, and again at the death of a sister I fell heir to a few hundred dollars. By such means and by strict economy we managed to live and to gain a little almost imperceptibly. Shortly after my first marriage I bought a little home entirely on credit, having the privilege of paying at indefinite periods, at any and all times when a few dollars could be spared it was paid over and my note accredited. The transaction looks pitiful enough, but it was the only plan for me to obtain a home as I was situated. Had I

deferred the purchase until I might lay by money with which to purchase, I must have remained homeless. My little family could all the time have used every dollar of my income without any infringement on the laws of economy.

In Iowa a home was obtained and a little surplus left, which after a few years enabled me to purchase a lot and house in Davenport, the rent of which after expenses has afforded some help. But the farm was sadly out of repair, requiring a considerable outlay every year to repair and keep it up. After defraying expenses and paying taxes the amount left is rather scant for a living. But the God of Jacob has provided for me and mine hitherto, and I can cheerfully trust his Providence for the time to come.

The Tithe

In early life, being always straightened for means it was felt that I never had much to spare, and the obligation to pay the "tithe" of my scant income was not taken seriously to heart. I plodded on carelessly as others did in neglect of the demand so plainly made in the Scriptures. But in 1870 I commenced and have continued to pay annually the tithe on my little income, keeping a memorandum of what is paid in each month in a book kept for that purpose. My experience has been highly satisfactory, and it is a matter of regret that I did not commence thus to obey the divine requirement in early life.

Bereavement

My wife Sarah, who had been affectionate and faithful during our pilgrimage together, was taken from me in April of 1873. She had been an invalid for more than a year, but passed away calmly and full of hope. Then followed a painful sense of loneliness, though my faithful daughter Martha, now Mrs. McCain, was then with me. This my second widowhood continued until the 30th day of December, 1875, when I was married again to Mrs. Rebecca McGarvey. This relation has been blessed as is believed to our mutual comfort and wellbeing.

Before coming to Iowa, I was so far remote from my brethren in the ministry that I could attend but seldom at Presbyterial and Synodical meetings. This was felt to be a great privation and had the appearance of unfaithfulness, though my finances would not justify the travel. But in Iowa the situation has been far more favorable, and I am happy to say that promptitude has since marked my course. Very rarely have I been absent from Presbytery and but once from Synod during my pastorate, and it was my privilege to be a delegate to the General Assembly four times. My intercourse with the brethren has been of the most cordial and fraternal character. Many have been the tokens of regard received at their hands, and in an instance, they carried their fancy rather far. News came from the board of

Monmouth College that they had honored me with the title of Doctor of Divinity. This news startled me, being entirely unexpected. I could not imagine why such honor had been lavished on one of such meager claims. The matter was still enveloped in mystery until I was told that the action was taken in answer to a petition signed by every member of the Presbytery.

After a pastorate of 21 years at LeClaire Prairie my ministerial labors were brought to an abrupt end by a stroke of paralysis, in the left side, which occurred in December of 1881, in the 45th year of my ministry. On the day previous to this attack, I had preached on Job 38:17, first clause, "Have the gates of death been opened unto thee?" Thoughts were thus directed to come of the things we do not know concerning death. My feelings were deeply enlisted and I spoke with unusual care and earnestness, though not realizing that it was to be my last. So soon as I could realize the nature of the disease, I accepted the visitation as a sovereign expression of the Divine will. My demit of the charge to the Presbytery was made by asking the brethren to acquiesce in the decision of the Higher Court. To this the congregation assented and the relation was dissolved.

Study of Prophecy

As stated in a previous chapter I contracted a great fondness for the figurative language of the Scripture when a student of

Theology. Hence, I took great pleasure in reading the prophets, though without any systematic method. But in the winter of 1842-3 my attention was forcibly enthusiastic speculations of Miller, who then figured as a Millenarian. The country was flooded with the writings of that sincere but deluded man. His theories generally I never comprehended, but in one particular I was forcibly impressed, that there was a radical error in the chronological arrangement of the Apocalyptic figures, and that Miller had been led astray by accepting this arrangement as correct. The chronological arrangement radically wrong, the leading symbols were ligated at improper times, and made to foreshadow events to which they had no illusion. It was like the experiment of locating the map of one State on the territory of another. There might be some fancied resemblances, but in fact irreconcilable discrepancies. In reading our orthodox expositors I found in many instances great ingenuity in giving a fanciful interpretation to predictions, which plainly declared something else. This was true of all the leading symbols, but especially so of the trumpets. Yet it was very difficult to be relieved from the misleading glasses of the fathers, so plausible were their fanciful constructions. But so soon as I began to study the Apocalypse simply in the light of history, satisfaction began to be found. I was soon

convinced that the fathers had been far too hasty in applying the seals, trumpet and vials to early events. Fixing those figures by such arbitrary arrangement was like an attempt to locate the map of our whole country on the Atlantic States. (The illustration is not too strong.) Such were the convictions which induced me to seek a new chronological arrangement of the Apocalyptic figures throughout. The undertaking was indeed onerous, far more so than might appear to a superficial observer. It involved the finding of new periods and new allusions for almost everything. The process was a tentative one. Untenable positions were abandoned in quick succession. The chronological chart that accompanied my published theory was projected and reprojected perhaps twenty times in the persistent effort to arrive at a true synopsis of the theory. My fixed purpose was to retain no position that seemed to require a forced construction, or a fanciful gloss superimposed on the text. Hence self-correction over and over again, and reams of paper were written and burned.

Having charge of a congregation, and having a family to support on a salary entirely insufficient, it devolved on me to supplement the deficiency by labors outside the duties of my profession. Hence a large amount of this investigation was done at night whilst other men slept. The wonder is that my health did not break

down. Yet I was so completely wedded to the theme, that it could not be abandoned. Nevertheless, the labor was not without its compensations. Frequent discoveries of new allusions gave emotions of exultation. Very often did thoughts occur unexpectedly, as suggestions from an invisible source, for which lively emotions of gratitude were due.

There were times of special effort, when my mind became so completely occupied with some mysterious question that the subject could not be discussed until it had been satisfactorily investigated. At such times I could have no sleep; and sometimes this chase after mysterious allusions would rob me of a second night's sleep. Those mystic figures, the "four living creatures"—their relation to the throne and to the vial angels, were specially exhausting. Incredible as the assertion may seem the involuntary strain had no abatement for six days and nights in succession, during which time I did not sleep one moment. At the close of the ordeal, I was completely exhausted. Appetite had failed, and my voice was almost gone. In fact, it was feared that I might never sleep again. But the end of the chase had come. The idea was seemingly grasped and committed to paper, and then I fell languidly to my couch and God gave me sleep.

The idea of drifting away from the fathers was at first an occasion of much anxiety. In that crude state of progress where old theories were dissolving and the new not sufficiently methodized to afford entire confidence, I seemed to see but imperfectly, saw men as trees walking. The situation was indeed a trying one. Indecision was very painful. I prayed frequently for light and for direction as to whether I should commit myself to the new course of interpretation, but no decision came. Eventually when about to engage in family worship, I stated my case to my wife and requested that she would unite with me in an earnest request that God would give me a decision as to what course I should pursue. To this she readily assented and the result was satisfactory beyond expectation. When on my knees, and just as I had begun to plead for relief there occurred quite a sensible earthquake. I felt myself swayed on my knees, and had an instantaneous presentment of what it was. More than this I had a simultaneous presentment of mind that was thrilling in its character. It seemed to be a complete response to my prayer. My feelings were captivated and elevated beyond anything ever before experienced. The visitation was manifest to my own mind, and accepted as sufficient; but it was to me personally, and not to others. Hence it was treasured in my own mind as private property, rarely have I ever named it even privately to personal friends. But to me

individually the influence has been of great moment. I arose from my knees, tranquil and confiding. Thence forth I was fully decided to pursue the investigation in reliance on divine direction. At that time comparatively little progress had been made. My thoughts were crude and some of them wild and untenable, had to be abandoned, as many subsequent thoughts were abandoned in the process of methodizing.

The influence of that night's experience was permanent. It sustained me in the most laborious periods of the search after truth, in the darkest hours of perplexity. Especially was such support important to me in view of the neglect, if not contempt, of my contemporaries. It is now over forty years since that memorable evening, but my recollections are still vivid.

In A.D. 1858 my Theory of the Apocalypse was published in condensed form, and I could heartily wish it had been still abbreviated, by omitting to guess the parts to be acted in the near future by existing nationalities. Of the things to be looked for I am still expectant; but of matters in detail, I cannot speak confidently. The great object was to arrive at a correct arrangement of the symbols, and to ascertain their meaning without determining who are to be the specific actors. And manifestly this correct arrangement is dependent on the true chronology of the several parts. If located

at their proper periods of time, the leading figures will speak for themselves. To arrive at the true arrangement of the parts chronologically was my great aim, and I am still quite satisfied with the positions assigned to the seals, vials, witnesses and trumpets. In fact, since the time of publication, I have found some strong additional evidences of the general correctness of the theory chronologically.

Of my contemporaries I expect no recognition. In less than a century from this time, events may begin to test the truth of the theory. My appeal is to the verdict of the twenty-first century.

In the 74th year of my age, and 45th of my ministry, though disabled by paralysis, I am now waiting for my great change. May God grant me an abundant entrance into His kingdom, through faith in His Son.

S. S. Ralston.

A.D. 1883, Feb.21st