

Walter Scott and the Five-Finger Exercise

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Walter Scott is one of the four fathers of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement. His evangelistic work on Ohio's Western Reserve from 1827 to 1830 solidifies him as one of the movement's most influential movers. However, it is not the number of people he converted to Christianity within that three-year period that elevates him to the standing of being one of the fathers; it is rather the system he devised concerning the order of how to bring people to salvation that cements him not only in Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement history, but also as one of the leading figures in all of American religious history.

Many in Stone-Campbell churches today who have any semblance of a plan of salvation that is ordered in faith, repentance, and baptism for the forgiveness of sins owe such a plan to Walter Scott. Scott declared that he had restored to order the ancient gospel in the fall of 1827 in "faith, repentance, baptism, remission of sins, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life."¹ Scott's plan of salvation was based on what he called "the Golden Oracle," which is Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.² During his evangelistic efforts on the Western Reserve from 1827 to 1830, his original *ordo salutis* was slightly condensed for evangelistic purposes to what is famously now referred to as the "five-finger exercise," as he combined the last two items of the Holy Spirit and eternal life on his little finger.³

Although many today recognize the nickname of the five-finger exercise and still use some form of it in bringing the lost to salvation, few recognize the name Walter Scott; fewer still understand what led him to develop his plan of salvation and why he did what he did. It is precisely this specific historical knowledge of Scott and his five-finger exercise that must serve as a guiding light today as opposed to being just another tradition held for tradition's sake.

¹ Walter Scott, *The Gospel Restored* (Cincinnati: O. H. Donogh, 1836), vi.

² Dwight E. Stevenson, *Walter Scott: The Voice of the Golden Oracle* (Joplin: College Press, 1946), 36.

³ *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), s.v. "Five Finger Exercise."

Therefore, what Scott did, why he did it, his influences, and how his plan of salvation is used today in Stone-Campbell churches is of the utmost importance in keeping the movement alive that he helped found.

Background and Influences

Walter Scott was born on October 31, 1796 in the town of Moffatt, county of Dumfriesshire, Scotland. He was raised in the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Showing talent and brilliance early in life, Scott's parents saved money so he could attend the University of Edinburgh.⁴ Scott attended sometime between 1812 and 1818.⁵ Scott's parents wanted him to become a minister in the Presbyterian Church; he agreed and directed his studies thusly at the university.⁶

At the university Scott studied Greek, Latin, logic, mathematics, and moral philosophy.⁷ Also, he likely would have studied a number of other topics offered such as Hebrew, divinity and ecclesiastical history, natural philosophy, universal civil history and antiquities, rhetoric, and belles letters.⁸ Scott's mental aptitude and excellent education prepared him not only for the ministerial work he would later do among the Stone-Campbell churches, but for the salvation doctrine he would seek to recover and employ. With such an education, Scott had

acquired the fundamental linguistic tools that would serve him well in his preaching, teaching, writing, and editorial work.... These initial formative years at the University of Edinburgh sharpened his mind, made him thirsty for knowledge, and enhanced his capacity to think in a larger historical, philosophical, and theological framework.⁹

⁴ William A. Gerrard III, *A Biographical Study of Walter Scott: American Frontier Evangelist* (Joplin: College Press, 1992), 19.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ William Baxter, *Life of Elder Walter Scott* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1926), 12.

⁷ Dwight E. Stevenson, *Walter Scott: The Voice of the Golden Oracle*, 19.

⁸ William A. Gerrard III, *A Biographical Study of Walter Scott*, 19.

⁹ Ibid., 19-20.

After Scott completed his education, he was invited to come to America by his uncle George Innes. When he arrived in July of 1818, his uncle helped secure him a position where he taught English, Greek, and Latin. Scott did not remain there for long, though. By May of 1819 he had already made his way out west to Pittsburgh. It is here that major influences in Scott's life, both past and soon to be present, would begin to shape his understanding of Christian doctrine and spur him on to religious discovery.

George Forrester and the Haldanes

In Pittsburgh, Scott met a man named George Forrester. Forrester would go on to be a major influence in Scott's life. Forrester was a Christian leader who had a small congregation, was a Scotsman like Scott, and also conducted an academy.¹⁰ Scott went to work for Forrester as an assistant teaching in his academy, and also began going to church with him.¹¹ Forrester's church and beliefs were not the same as Scott's, though. Scott had been reared a Presbyterian, but Forrester and his church were heavily influenced by the Haldanes. Scott quickly realized that Forrester's views on Christianity were different from his own.¹²

Robert and James Haldane were Christian evangelists, and brothers, whose teachings spread to America from Scotland. They advocated the weekly observation of the Lord's Supper and the restoration of the primitive order of the church as outlined in the New Testament.¹³ They left the Presbyterian Church of Scotland in 1799 over related beliefs, and thus were in opposition to it. It is quite likely that Scott, while at school in Edinburgh, at least would have heard of James Haldane, as Haldane in 1801 began preaching in Edinburgh at the "Tabernacle" and stayed there

¹⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹¹ Ibid., 20-21.

¹² William Baxter, *Life of Elder Walter Scott*, 18.

¹³ Amy Collier Artman, "An Implicit Creed: Walter Scott and the Golden Oracle," in *Walter Scott: A Nineteenth-Century Evangelical*, ed. Mark G. Toulouse (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 43.

until his death.¹⁴ In Forrester's church, then, Scott would have been exposed to the following beliefs and practices: no creeds; communion every Sunday; no infant baptism; members of the church are only those who make an adult decision to be a Christian and are immersed; independent church with no presbytery or hierarchy; authority centered on the Scripture only.¹⁵ It should be noted that baptism by immersion is something that developed later in Haldane churches in America—including Forrester's church.¹⁶

Scott suddenly found himself in deep conflict with his traditional Presbyterian upbringing. Forrester ultimately convinced Scott that the Bible must be the authority, and not what the Presbyterian Church dictates, or any church for that matter, or creed. Scott became particularly concerned about his baptism. Since Scott was raised a Presbyterian, he had not been immersed as Scripture taught. If Scott's newfound conviction and understanding of the Scripture's authority was correct, his status as a Christian was in question. Also, the Presbyterian teaching he had accepted was in error. He thus heavily engaged in the study of baptism. Aided by his knowledge of Greek, he studied all the New Testament passages concerning baptism.¹⁷

Dwight E. Stevenson sums up Scott's conclusion:

Well, then! There was nothing to do but to be baptized! And George Forrester immersed him. So great was the change of perspective wrought in him by these past few weeks, and by the decisive act which had brought all the discussion and questioning to a focus, that what he had formerly known seemed like a pale imitation of religion, if not a mistake altogether. "I have now been converted to Christianity!" he exulted.¹⁸

The brief time Scott spent with Forrester rocked his world. Sadly, in 1820 Forrester drowned in a swimming or bathing incident in the Allegheny River. Forrester's influence did not

¹⁴ Thomas H. Olbricht, "Walter Scott as Biblical Interpreter," in *Walter Scott: A Nineteenth-Century Evangelical*, ed. Mark G. Toulouse (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 84.

¹⁵ Dwight E. Stevenson, *Walter Scott: The Voice of the Golden Oracle*, 24.

¹⁶ Amy Collier Artman, "An Implicit Creed: Walter Scott and the Golden Oracle," 43.

¹⁷ Dwight E. Stevenson, *Walter Scott: The Voice of the Golden Oracle*, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

end there, though, as he left Scott his personal library, as well as the academy and the church.¹⁹ Forrester's influence on Scott in the Haldanean belief system and baptism by immersion was an important phase in Scott's spiritual foundation which would allow him to move toward future discovery.

According to Stevenson, Forrester's influence led Scott to begin contemplating questions such as: How did the Holy Spirit operate in conversion? Was there one clear scriptural plan of salvation which would correct and reconcile the divergent practices of Christendom? How would one classify the teachings of Scripture? What was its central teaching?²⁰ Asking these kinds of questions is what ultimately led Scott to working out his famous five-finger exercise based on the belief that Jesus is the Christ.

Rationalism and Scottish Common Sense Realism

Scott's questioning of Scripture is not surprising, as he was "a child of his time and expressed himself in terms of the thought patterns of his own day."²¹ He was influenced by a number of great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers, mainly Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, John Locke, and Thomas Reid.²² Perhaps this influence began in his education at Edinburgh, but also through the library Forrester left Scott upon his death, as by Scott's own admission, Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* was among those left to him.²³ Still, the influence of the day and the philosophical roots of the Stone-Campbell Movement are the "Enlightenment of Britain and its premier manifestation, Scottish Common Sense philosophy,

¹⁹ William A. Gerrard III, *A Biographical Study of Walter Scott*, 21-22.

²⁰ Dwight E. Stevenson, *Walter Scott: The Voice of the Golden Oracle*, 26.

²¹ William A. Gerrard III, *A Biographical Study of Walter Scott*, 12-13.

²² *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. "Reason, Place of."

²³ Walter Scott, *The Messiahship, or Great Demonstration, Written for the Union of Christians, on Christian Principles, as Pleaded for in the Current Reformation* (Kansas City: Old Paths Book Club, 1950), 7.

which instilled profound confidence in the ability of critical human reasoning (and the subsidiary faculties of human intelligence) to determine the truth of facts and propositions.”²⁴

Bacon was the father of the scientific method which proposed inductive reasoning: start with the evidence and then come to the conclusion. He insisted that Scripture be studied this way. Newton also was a proponent of drawing from facts to develop conclusions. He defined faith as the belief in testimony, which consisted of facts drawn from Scripture. He taught Christianity was based on the testimony of Scripture, and not on mystical experiences. Locke was the father of empiricism which says knowledge is the result of experience. He said nothing should be made a test for communion except for what God has made necessary for salvation. For these leading thinkers knowledge was a matter of gathering facts followed by making conclusions.

Thomas Reid, the developer of Scottish Common Sense Realism, taught reason as a fixed critical function of human intelligence shared by all peoples in all times.²⁵ Therefore, “an exegete here and now could confidently understand the truth being conveyed by an ancient author of Scripture who shared exactly the same reasonableness and truthfulness.”²⁶ Scottish Common Sense endorsed inductive reasoning as the scientific path to knowledge.²⁷ This philosophy was an attempt to show Christianity as reasonable in an age where empirical methods of knowing reigned.²⁸ Scottish Common Sense appealed to the American frontier ideal of independence because it taught that the common man can understand Scripture on his own without the need for church tradition telling him what it means. This Common Sense philosophy “offered the [Stone-

²⁴ *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. “Reason, Place of.”

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, s.v. “Scott, Walter.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*, s.v. “Common Sense Philosophy.”

Campbell] Movement an evangelistic methodology very appealing to a population that appreciated individual judgment and personal freedom,”²⁹ of which Scott took advantage. Scott’s evangelistic success on the Western Reserve surely is due to him preaching the right message at the right time.

Enlightenment and Scottish Common Sense influences on Scott are obvious and can be directly seen in how he desired his listeners to respond to the gospel according to his famous five-finger exercise: “the convert was simply to believe the facts of the gospel, repent and be baptized.”³⁰ “Scott’s order of salvation depended heavily upon a propositional approach to the Bible and upon categories often provided by Scottish Common Sense Realism.”³¹

Further, these influences are seen in his conception of the Golden Oracle—the confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God—as detailed by Amy Collier Artman:

“In Scott’s thinking the central theme of the Scriptures and the key to their interpretation was the messiahship of Jesus Christ. This was, for Scott, the fundamental truth of the Christian faith and the creed of Christianity; he called it ‘the Golden Oracle.’” There is a connection between Scott’s understanding of the Golden Oracle and his perception of the Common Sense Realism idea of a *first principle*.

Thomas Reid...described the nature of a first principle as foundational. ...examination can only end when one finds a proposition that supports all that is built upon it.... For Scott, the primary self-evident proposition of Christianity was that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. [Scott] states, “In the philosophical investigation of any system, after ascending to first principles, it becomes our privilege to descend from these principles to the exposition of all facts and phenomena connected with the system.”³²

Scott’s logical, reasonable, rational, common-sense approach to the Bible led him to his revelation of the Golden Oracle, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and from that, to his salvation system of belief, repentance, baptism, forgiveness of sins, Holy Spirit, and eternal life.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., s.v. “Five Finger Exercise.”

³¹ Ibid., s.v. “Scott, Walter.”

³² Amy Collier Artman, “An Implicit Creed: Walter Scott and the Golden Oracle,” 44.

Without such a background and influences, it is highly unlikely that Scott would have ever stumbled upon what he called the Ancient Gospel.

Scott and the Religious Climate of His Day

By 1827 Scott, who was thoroughly dissatisfied with the religion of his youth and of his day, had fully embraced Restoration Movement principles. The main Protestant doctrine of the day was TULIP Calvinism.³³ It taught that the Holy Spirit provided enabling grace directly within sinners so that they could exercise faith and repentance.³⁴ It affirmed religious experience as proof of conversion:

...stress was placed on the supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit in one's conversion and the feelings associated with it. One gained membership in the church by standing before the gathered congregation and relating in detail an acceptable conversion experience. ...the principal emphasis was placed on the Holy Spirit's special operation in conversion.³⁵

Without such a mystical conversion experience involving the Holy Spirit and the so called feelings associated with it, one was not considered to have been converted. This doctrine caused many to worry and spend months before they were considered to be saved.

Scott's logical, common-sense, five-finger conversion model directly opposed TULIP Calvinism. Scott's gospel presentation did not require some supernatural Holy Spirit experience as a proof of conversion. Rather, "in line with Enlightenment presuppositions about humanity, Scott asserted the role of the independent individual who hears the evidence and rationally decides to respond in faith."³⁶ He simply taught the people to read the words of Scripture and decide for themselves. Following Scripture only and thus believing in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, followed by repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins, was all the "proof"

³³ William A. Gerrard III, *A Biographical Study of Walter Scott*, 27.

³⁴ *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. "Scott, Walter."

³⁵ William A. Gerrard III, *A Biographical Study of Walter Scott*, 27.

³⁶ *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, s.v. "Scott, Walter."

anyone needed, as God promised in Scripture to give forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life.

Scott had in a sense reinvented conversion theology with his Golden Oracle and five-finger exercise. For Scott, it was not only a religious discovery, but an answer to Calvinism, as “his interpretation of salvation was strongly dependent on Locke’s theory of knowledge and was developed as a polemic against the Calvinistic conception of salvation prevalent in the preaching on the American frontier.”³⁷ If it were not for what Scott and others saw as the inadequacy of Protestant doctrine, there would likely have been no reason to seek to recover any further truth.

Scott was very much a product of his time, in that the conversion theology he recovered and employed was born from the perceived needs and philosophies of his day. It is true that most inventions, discoveries, or recoveries that happen anywhere spring from the specific needs of a specific time. Scott’s happened to be in the swelling moments of the Stone-Campbell Movement; he is in many ways the benefactor of an established wave of key philosophies and reformative religious ideals already bearing fruit. This is not to take away from his genius though, as his was the mind that put it all together and successfully employed it. When Alexander Campbell heard of the success Scott was having on the Western Reserve, he sent his father Thomas to see what Scott was doing. Thomas replied to Alexander in the spring of 1828:

I perceive that theory and practice in religion, as well as in other things, are matters of distinct consideration. It is one thing to know concerning the art of fishing—for instance, the rod, the line, the hook, and the bait, too; and quite another thing to handle them dexterously when thrown into the water, so as to make it take. We have long known the former (the theory), and have spoken and published many things *correctly concerning* the ancient gospel, its simplicity and perfect adaptation to the present state of mankind, for the benign and gracious purposes of his immediate relief and complete salvation; but I must confess that, in respect to the *direct exhibition* and *application* of it for that blessed purpose, I am at present for the first time upon the ground where the thing has appeared to be *practically exhibited* to the proper purpose.³⁸

³⁷ William A. Gerrard III, *A Biographical Study of Walter Scott*, 149.

³⁸ William Baxter, *Life of Elder Walter Scott*, 65.

Scott's Disappointment

Scott's five-finger exercise resulted largely from his background, influences, and the religious climate of his day. In many ways the five-finger exercise was the right doctrine at the right time. Scott had great success employing his ancient gospel on the Western Reserve from 1827 to 1830 in baptizing 3,000 souls.³⁹ After leaving the Western Reserve, and until his death, Scott took up serving as a minister at a number of churches, conducted preaching tours, wrote and edited periodicals, and wrote theological books.⁴⁰ He never stopped preaching and championing the Restoration Movement principles of unity and truth for the evangelization of the world. This does not mean, though, that he did not have any regrets.

In 1844 Jacob Creath, Jr., a minister among Restoration Movement churches, asked Scott if he still thought the ancient gospel (i.e., the five-finger exercise) he preached remained the basis of union.⁴¹ Scott's reply "reveals he had some second thoughts about the role his "five-finger exercise" played in the history of the Disciples of Christ."⁴² Scott said,

Our main thought at the time was to push back the christian profession on to its original basis—the Messiah. We did this, and the people were received to the remission of sins on the primitive faith of Jesus as the Son of God. But although this was the actual and practical restoration of the central truth in our religion to its proper place in the christian system, many failed nevertheless to see it, and were carried away wholly by the easier and more popular generalization of faith, repentance, baptism, &c., till, in fact, they do not know their own principles when they are advocated.⁴³

While Scott very well had officially restored the central truth of Christianity (the first principle and primitive faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God) in the Christian system, he

³⁹ William A. Gerrard III, *A Biographical Study of Walter Scott*, 35.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

⁴¹ Mark G. Toulouse, "Walter Scott: A Nineteenth-Century Evangelical," in *Walter Scott: A Nineteenth-Century Evangelical*, ed. Mark G. Toulouse (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

admitted that the evangelical methodology he employed (the five-finger exercise) enabled converts under this methodology to lose sight of the principles it was supposed to teach. In other words, just 17 years after its invention, the five-finger exercise based on the Golden Oracle had become a sort of tradition in and of itself, usurping the greater truths for which it was devised to recapture. It did not produce the union Scott desired. Perhaps the fault was not in Scott or his genius, but in what people do with systems that are at first revolutionary to popular understanding. The system itself takes precedence and becomes the thing preached. It becomes the new process people have to follow in order to be saved, and the depths of its own founding become obscured and perhaps lost to many. All one has to do is follow the five-finger exercise and he is in the clear, with not much more to pursue as he has achieved his goal of getting saved. This was never Scott's intention, as his disappointment is clear in the above quote.

The Five-Finger Exercise Today

Regardless of his disappointment, Scott's five-finger exercise has survived and morphed over the last 185 years since its inception. The problem Scott recognized which caused his disappointment, though, is still alive today, despite how the exercise has been changed and reworded. The two most popular forms that remain today are "hear, believe, repent, confess, be baptized," and "believe, repent, confess, be baptized, live the life." Most Stone-Campbell churches today still call potential converts to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, repent of their sins, and be baptized to receive the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The concept of "confess" has been added as one of the fingers in the exercise based on Romans 10:9, which would have been included in Scott's original first finger of faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. Also, the five fingers now focus entirely on what man must do to receive salvation, versus Scott's original system which included three things man must do (faith,

repentance, baptism) and three things God does or gives (forgiveness, Holy Spirit, eternal life). What this shows is Scott's reasoning behind the five-finger exercise has been further subverted and instead the process of getting through the five points has been emphasized; getting someone through the process quickly is emphasized at the cost of personal understanding. In some instances it has become fast food for the soul.

If Scott came back to life today and saw what has become of his five-finger exercise, he would likely see it as a perpetuation of the problem he noted in 1844—it was never meant to become an all-encompassing representation of the bare minimum a person must believe and do to become saved, thus usurping deeper personal understanding. He would likely conclude that what he saw in his day has advanced to become even more of a tradition that has lost its original intent and deeper meaning.

The ultimate fate of Stone-Campbell churches rests on what kind of foundation they are giving their converts in their conversions. There is nothing more important than what a church teaches the lost in conversion, as this sets the foundation upon which they build their spiritual life. It is not enough to run someone through today's version of the five-finger exercise and then hope they will want to stick around and give a tithe. Stone-Campbell churches must do the same thing Walter Scott did in his day: understand the religious needs of a people, consider the religious and philosophical climate of the day, and devise a conversion methodology that will deliver a serious impact. The methodology that worked for Scott on the Western Reserve from 1827 to 1830 may not work in 2012. Perhaps the greatest lesson Walter Scott has to teach in addition to the recovery of the ancient gospel is that any conversion model or methodology must be based on the truths of Scripture and be able to convey those truths, not merely as a process, but as a life-transforming experience on the level impacting the convert's spiritual DNA.

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