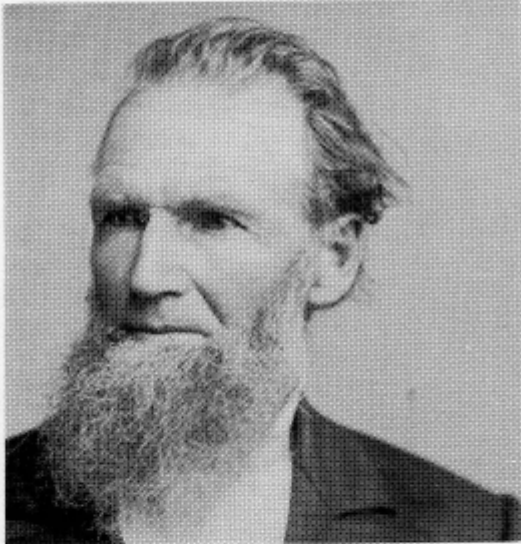


PARDEE BUTLER EVANGELIST AND SOCIAL REFORMER

By Calvin P. Habig*



Pardee Butler

Nineteen eighty-eight marks the one-hundredth anniversary of the death of Pardee Butler, an early pioneer of evangelistic efforts in the state of Kansas. Butler has been called by Robert Fife "a classic example of the nineteenth century Protestant social reformer."¹ And that he was. Butler was usually found in the middle of the heat produced by the debate over the vital social issues of the last century. And yet none excelled Butler in evangelistic and church-planting fervor. Butler saw both social reform and evangelism as complementary prongs in the battle for restoring persons to God. Social action was not opposed to, or in addition to Christian evangelism, but integrally linked with the proclamation of Jesus as Lord of all of human life.

Pardee Butler was born March 9, 1816, in Marcelles, New York, but was raised and educated in Wadsworth, Ohio. Although described as "slow of speech"² Pardee participated in the debates held at the local lyceum. He learned more than mere

debating skills in these experiences, for he later stated that he "took his first lessons at the hands of mobs by being pelted with eggs for delivering temperance lectures."³

After moving to Wadsworth, the Butler family had joined the local Baptist church. But in 1828 the Butlers and three other families joined together to form a church corresponding with their new understanding of the New Testament church that they had received from reading Alexander Campbell's Christian Baptist. Although the Butler family was a leader in the local church, young Pardee staunchly refused to be immersed. Together with an older uncle, Aaron Pardee, Butler had been "turned off" by the argumentativeness within the churches and widespread mysticism. When Alexander Campbell came to Wadsworth in late 1833 for an area annual meeting, the two approached the well known editor and they discussed difficulties they had with Christianity. Although not initially convinced by Campbell's views, Butler followed Campbell to area meetings listening to him speak and returned home to read and investigate Campbell's arguments. After almost two years of study, both Butler and his uncle were immersed in a stream near town. Butler's daughter, Rosetta Hastings, records that as he entered the stream Butler solemnly declared, "Lord I believe! Help thou my unbelief."⁴

Soon Pardee Butler was teaching school in the areas surrounding Wadsworth and preaching in area churches. He never received a college education, but during these early years, diligently studied the writings of Campbell, church history, and began to commit the New Testament to memory. Growing up on the Western Reserve, a hotbed both of abolitionist fervor and of the Christian Churches, Butler was used to finding the "causes which each advocated...joined in the pulpit."⁵ During

these years he was heavily influenced by "Judge" Brown, the superintendent of the Sunday School at the church in Wadsworth and an uncle of the abolitionist, "John Brown of Ossawatimic." Butler assimilated much of "Judge" Brown's firmness against slavery and for temperance into his own beliefs and work.

In 1839 the Butler family, sheep herders by profession, moved from Wadsworth to the Sandusky Plains of Ohio. The extremely unhealthy environment of this marshy prairie in northwestern Ohio caused the death of both of his parents, wore his wife out with malaria, killed two of his children by scarlet fever, and damaged his own health, particularly his voice so that he was forced to discontinue preaching. The family moved to his wife's hometown of Sullivan, but a change of climate did not improve his health. For several years Butler went through extreme depression believing that everything important to him in temporal terms had been taken away.

Discouraged, Butler sold his farm in Ohio and in 1850 moved to Iowa. There he bought land and determined to farm the land. In time, however, his health improved and he began preaching again, first as a district evangelist in the east-central part of Iowa and then as a district evangelist in Schuyler and Brown counties in Illinois. Although Butler saw his years of preaching in Illinois as "the golden days of my life," the strain of preaching in Illinois while his family remained on the farm in Iowa was too much. And so in the spring of 1855, Pardee Butler joined the rush of humanity seeking land in Kansas.

The Kansas-Nebraska Bill of 1854 had repealed the Missouri Compromise which had prohibited slavery in territory lying north of thirty-six degrees and thirty minutes north latitude. The Kansas-Nebraska Bill established the principle that the people of Kansas and Nebraska should determine whether their territories were to be free or slave states. Thousands of settlers on both sides of the issue flocked into Kansas. The Butler family was among those "Free-Soilers" who wanted to vote to keep Kansas free of slavery. But Butler throughout his life stressed that slavery was not the primary reason for coming to Kansas.

Instead, he was called primarily by the op-

portunity of reuniting his family on cheap, fertile land where there were a number of Disciples who needed to be organized into churches:

It was certain that eastern Kansas, in the matter of fertility of soil, and in all the elements of agricultural wealth, would be a desirable location...It was certain that eastern Kansas would be early settled from Missouri; and in no State was there a larger percentage of the people known as Disciples. I would, therefore, be among my brethren...In any case, there was a fair prospect of gaining in Kansas a position of pecuniary independence.⁶

Butler came to Kansas for personal, not political reasons, but soon realized that in the agitated state of the territory, he either would acquiesce to the pro-slavery forces and live in peace, or he would stand up for his beliefs and live with the consequences.

Butler staked out a 160-acre claim on the banks of Stranger Creek, twelve miles west of Atchison. He found he was surrounded by Disciples, but there was not one Disciples church in the entire Kansas territory. Therefore, in the month of June 1855, he called for a meeting of all Disciples in the area. Disciples of all sorts came to the meeting at which Butler preached, and the following month the first Christian Church (the Mount Pleasant Church) was established in the territory.

Three months after establishing his claim, Pardee Butler was ready to return east and bring his family back to Kansas with him. He traveled to Atchison to catch the steamboat heading east. Fear of claim jumpers made him eager to bring his family back as soon as possible.

While awaiting the steamboat in Atchison (a rabidly pro-slavery town), Butler was apprehended by a mob who threatened to hang him as an abolitionist unless he signed a set of resolutions condemning all local free-soilers as being agents of the abolitionist New England Emigrant Aid Society. A "trial" was held on the banks of the Missouri River which lasted several hours. At last, rather than hanging him, the mob set him adrift on the Missouri River on a raft of two rotten logs nailed together, with a flagpole at one end flying a banner declaring that Butler was an agent for the Underground Railroad. Unable to swim and adrift on the river, Butler eventually made his way to shore and sought help. His "rafting" soon became a nationally known case. It was said that "this humble preacher...became, at once, the

representative of millions of men. The story of his wrongs was told in every newspaper in the land and was discussed around the fireplaces of a million homes."⁷

Butler returned to Kansas with his family and continued to develop his claim. In April 1856, on a subsequent trip to Atchison, he was again mobbed and this time he was tarred and cottoned (for lack of feathers). When an account of his treatment was printed on the front-page of a Lawrence newspaper on the same day pro-slavery forces attacked and sacked the city, Butler became a marked man. He lived in hiding for several months, keeping constantly on the move. He spent much of this time traveling around the state organizing the new Republican Party in the state. Such threats were even made upon other Disciples because of their association with Pardee Butler that area Disciples meetings were discontinued until more peaceful times.

In 1858, the Kansas Missionary Society was formed and Pardee Butler was hired as the state evangelist. But controversy arose when Butler wrote to Isaac Errett asking if the ACMS (American Christian Missionary Society) would be interested in financially supplementing the work in Kansas. Errett thought such aid was possible, but only if Butler would refrain from all anti-slavery teachings and activities. Butler refused, saying that the Disciple brethren in Kansas, who were on both sides of the issue, had not put any such restrictions on him. He insisted on being free to teach what he saw to be ethical Christian truth alongside evangelistic Christian truth: "This matter of slavery is a Bible question—a question of justice between man and man — of mercy and humanity."⁸ The debate continued to grow until a rival arose. This was the Christian Missionary Society. Finally after the Civil War when the issue of slavery was moot, the ACMS no longer found Butler objectionable and he was supported by that group as a missionary to Kansas on a part-time basis.

The churches in Kansas grew and prospered from the work of Butler and men like him. From their beginnings in the wooded bottoms of Butler's neighbor's land with Butler preaching the first sermon, the Disciples had grown and associated into many congregations throughout the state.

Beginning in 1855, they had grown to 26 churches with 900 members by 1860; 77 churches with 3,020 members in 1865; and by 1890, two years after Butler's death, Disciples numbered 29,427.

Butler served as state evangelist, president of the Kansas State Missionary Society, and was a contributing editor to early Kansas Disciples' newspapers. His importance to the organizational meetings during the early years in Kansas is seen when it is observed that during those years when Butler was traveling in other parts of the nation raising money, no general convention or missionary gatherings were held.

Beginning in 1870, Pardee Butler began the ethical crusade that would last the rest of his life. Butler saw the liquor traffic as a moral threat to the nation and worked incessantly against it. In the fight against the alcohol trade in Kansas, he wrote:

Kansas led the nation in the abolition of American slavery; Kansas ought a second time to lead the nation in a universal amnesty (prohibition) so that there shall be nothing to hinder that we shall preach the gospel to the devotees of the mother of Babylon, and to the millions of godless, Christless heathen that are thrown upon our hands, thus making them good Christians that they may be good Americans.⁹

Butler fought first for a Prohibition amendment to the state constitution and then for enforcement legislation. After his death in 1888, it was written, "Pardee Butler as much or more than any one man, made the Prohibition movement in Kansas the marvelous success it is."¹⁰

Pardee Butler is well known for his social and political involvement. He stressed that in a democracy, the Christian has the right to (and must) push for what he believes to be just, fair and humane laws and policies. The individual Christian, whether he be farmer, preacher, magistrate, or president, "must still act as one who must give account to heaven's eternal King."¹¹

The Christian must be free to advocate what he sees to be the Christian course of action to any given problem. The Christian cannot release himself "from the obligations growing out of a common humanity; and that it is consequently the duty of the Christian preacher to thunder against wrong and oppression wherever or in whomsoever found."¹²

The decisions of government will be made "by political law, enacted by a

political body, composed of men nominated in a political caucus, and elected in a political election."¹³ Therefore, it is vital for the Christian to be involved in all areas of political life. Butler was active in primary caucuses, elections, oral and written debates, all in an attempt to sway the political forces toward what he saw to be the Christian solution to the problems of the day. Although Pardee Butler never ran for or held public office, he was the leading vote-getter of Horace Greeley's electoral candidates in Kansas in the 1872 presidential elections. Urged to run for public office throughout his life, he considered the office of "a Christian preacher the highest office on earth."¹⁴

Although strong minded, Pardee Butler was a peaceful man who consistently refused to carry fire-arms. He was a humanitarian who struggled consistently to improve the lot of those who were hurting. But most of all, he was a man of God who believed that the church had a profound responsibility both to see that its members acted in ways that were consistent with what the church taught, and to fight for the cause of right and justice in a hostile society so that the gospel might have freer access.

In 1909, the Centennial Convention of the Disciples of Christ heard a roll call of the fathers of the Disciples movement. The eleventh chapter of Hebrews was "expanded" to read:

By faith, Pardee Butler became a sojourner in the land of Bleeding Kansas, dwelling in dug outs, along with John O'Kane, John Boggs and J. H. Bauserman, who through faith subdued slavery, wrought righteousness and prohibition, escaping the edge of the sword. These, with others, were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain the victory of the Gospel and establish an unsectarian, Undenominational New Testament Church of Christ in the free and virgin soil of the great plains of the West.¹⁵

¹³David Edwin Harrell, "Pardee Butler, Kansas Crusader," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 34 (Winter 1968): 386.

¹⁴Rosetta Hastings, *Personal Recollections of Pardee Butler* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1889), pp. 35-36.

¹⁵A. T. Andreas, *A History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883), p. 408.

¹⁶Hastings, *Recollections*, p. 15.

¹⁷Robert O. Fife, "Alexander Campbell and the Christian Church in the Slavery Controversy" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Indiana, 1960), p. 168.

¹⁸Hastings, *Recollections*, pp. 35-36.

¹⁹John A. Martin, "Two Kansas Pioneers," *Atchison Champion*, 25 October 1888, p. 1.

²⁰Hastings, *Recollections*, p. 321.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 224.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 239.

²³Pardee Butler, "Lectures on the Protestant Reformation," in Sarah Eastman, "Scrapbook of Pardee Butler Clippings," Kansas Christian Missionary Society, Topeka, Kansas, p. 111.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵Pardee Butler, "Prohibition," *The Christian* 15 (24 October 1878): 1.

²⁶Hastings, *Recollections*, p. 312.

²⁷Grant K. Lewis, "Heroes of the Faith in the West," in *Centennial Convention Report: One Hundredth Anniversary of the Disciples of Christ, Pittsburg, October 11-19, 1909* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1909), p. 369.

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vention" became the "General Minister and President" of the Christian Church.

Government pressure during World War II took the form of action by Selective Service requiring ministerial candidates to be pre-registered in seminary if undergraduate, and in seminaries if graduate. Otherwise they would be subject to draft for military service. This at once increased the percentage of college graduates who went on to seminary and also delayed ordination until seminary had been completed. Naturally, too, the church moved in generally and regionally to oversee ministerial candidacy, education, placement and ordination. And it moved toward the practice of other denominations to license ministers for a period before ordaining them. Ordination, when it came, was no longer the action of a single congregation.

Thus Disciple ministry changed and developed, not only from the start-lines in 1804 and 1809, but also from before World War II, and all of this is a part of history.

¹Riley B. Montgomery, *The Education of Ministers of the Disciples of Christ* (Bethany Press, 1931). The figures, based on Montgomery's exact percentages, are approximate.

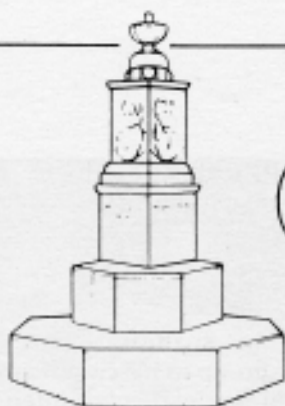
²Dwight E. Stevenson, *Walter Scott: Voice of the Golden Oracle* (Bethany Press, 1946), pp. 91, 108.

³Dwight E. Stevenson, "Beginnings in Theological Education," *Lexington Theological Seminary 1865-1965: The College of the Bible Century* (Bethany Press, 1964), Appendix I, pp. 383-84.

⁴*The Scroll: The Journal of the Campbell Institute*, LVIII (Autumn, 1966), pp. 19-27.

⁵*Ibid.*

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*The plantation mansion on the
Southern Christian Institute campus.*