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DAVID LIPSCOMB ON REBAPTISM: CONTEXTS OF A CONTROVERSY

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This paper sets David Lipscomb’s position on rebaptism in three contexts. First, to provide a historical context, it states the circumstances of his baptism and examines how and to what ends he employed the narrative of it. Second, to craft a theological context, it contours in a broad way his doctrine of baptism. Third, to furnish an ecclesial context, it scrutinizes the practice of receiving members at Nashville’s South College Street Christian Church, where he served as an elder.

Historical Context

Amid discussions about re-immersion in 1883, 1884, 1906, and 1907, Lipscomb called attention to his own baptism. For Lipscomb, the root issue in the debate was whether and how a candidate is prepared for baptism. If a candidate seeks to honor God by obeying God’s instruction to be baptized, for Lipscomb that person is baptized for the highest and noblest reason of all. As an example, in April 1883 he cited his immersion at the hands of Tolbert Fanning. “I was baptized quite young by Bro. Fanning,” he wrote.

He asked me why I wished to be baptized. I responded ‘to obey God.’ He explained it was to bring me into a condition that God would forgive me and accept me as a child of God. I responded, ‘I wish to be baptized to obey God.’ I have studied the question for forty years, and I do not yet know how to improve the answer I made. 1

The following year, in October 1884, H. M. Towry of Prairie View, Arkansas, wrote: “Bros. Lipscomb & Sewell: There is a preacher in this country that says Bro. D. L. was once an old Primitive Baptist; that he is no scholar at

1 David Lipscomb, “Re-baptizing Baptists” Gospel Advocate 25 (April 25, 1883): 257; hereinafter GA. If by 1883 he studied this question for forty years, then he first investigated it in 1843 at about age 12. Jerry Gross, “The Rebaptism Controversy among Churches of Christ,” in Baptism and the Remission of Sins, ed. David Fletcher (Joplin: College Press, 1990), 300, first explored the significance of Lipscomb’s autobiographical statements on the rebaptism controversy. My attempt in this paper is to pursue with greater detail a line of inquiry he initiated. Gross is an excellent introduction as is Robert Hooper, Crying in the Wilderness: The Life and Times of David Lipscomb, rev. ed. (Nashville: Lipscomb University, 2011), 11–37 and 129–32.
all; that he knew nothing about the Greek, and butchered the English language wonderfully. I denied it. I want to know if I am right.” Lipscomb obliged,

D. L. was never a member of any church but the church of Christ. He became a member of that church at fourteen years of age. He is not much scholar, and never claimed to be. He makes blunders in English frequently, knows a little Greek, but has tried to understand the Bible. And whether speaking of the Greek or English, is always careful to be right. Being right is the best scholarship. 2

In 1906 T. R. Burnett privately requested from Lipscomb certain details about the circumstances of his baptism. Burnett heard rumors and assertions about who administered it (Tolbert Fanning or a Baptist preacher?) and whether at that time Lipscomb understood it to be a condition of remission. Burnett explained to others that Lipscomb “did not at that time know that design of baptism” and told Lipscomb he “once attended a debate where a party of rebaptist preachers were calling you hard names because you trusted to ‘sect baptism,’ and I defended you.”3

In the event his recollections might be “of passing interest to others,” Lipscomb answered Burnett publicly in the Advocate. “I was baptized by Tolbert Fanning in the fifteenth year of my age,” he said. Stressing how he “had been taught baptism was a condition of forgiveness from the time I was taught anything about baptism,” Lipscomb further revealed he “heard Tolbert Fanning preach twice every Sunday for several months before I was baptized, and one who could do this and not understand baptism was the act in which God accepted the believer as his child was a dullard.”4

2 David Lipscomb, “Query,” GA 26 (Oct. 1, 1884): 631. The sources disagree concerning Lipscomb’s age at the time of his baptism. He was born 21 Jan. 1831. If baptized at age fourteen, it occurred in 1845; if at age fifteen, 1846. See fuller discussion below.


4 Lipscomb, “Some Recollections,” 649. It is possible to reconcile this with the 1883 article cited above if Lipscomb uses a cardinal number (“fourteen years of age”) in the first article and an ordinal one (“fifteenth year”) in the second. Earl Irvin West, The Search for the Ancient Order: A History of the Restoration Movement 1849–1906, vol. 2 (Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, 1950), 9, places the baptism in 1845 at age fourteen, in agreement with the 1 Oct. 1884 GA article. That West mentions Fanning baptizing Lipscomb “in a box,” however, suggests he knew of the 11 Oct. 1906 GA article though he does not cite it.


By the spring of 1846, David and his brother William were acclimated to student life at Fanning’s Franklin College. In addition to classroom lectures, recitations, and chapel exercises, Fanning usually preached twice each Sunday at the Franklin College Christian Church. On one of those Sundays in April or May, he took opportunity to reply to an address made earlier in the week by faculty member J. Smith Fowler. Their classmate A. L. Johnson remembered Fanning’s three-hour sermon as “his best, and would, if in print, now stand, under the severest criticism, in clearness, elegance of diction, strength, power, and pathos, unexcelled by any pulpit effort of the nineteenth century.” Fowler, with I. N. Loomis and student S. R. Hay, responded to Fanning’s invitation and were baptized that afternoon. Fowler and Loomis were, alternately, professors of mathematics, chemistry, mechanic arts, and assistant professors of horticulture. Hay was a student from Illinois; all were Presbyterians. These baptisms sparked a revival of sorts among the student body. Fanning reported in


Additional details, taken together, favor 1846 over 1845: 1) that Lipscomb heard Fanning preach for several months fits best with 2) data from Hooper, Crying, 30–37, demonstrating the Lipscomb brothers entered Franklin College in Jan. 1846. Further, 3) as cited below, William Lipscomb was baptized by Fanning in 1846. Finally, if the baptism occurred in 1845, it is difficult to reconcile the Lipscomb brothers’ year in Virginia with David’s having heard Fanning for some months prior to his baptism. The brothers grew up in the same atmosphere and shared the same preparatory experiences; it is very likely they were immersed at or near the same time, at Franklin College by Tolbert Fanning in May or early June 1846.


August that ten of his students had been recently immersed.\textsuperscript{7} Fanning baptized William Lipscomb in late spring or early summer 1846.\textsuperscript{8} David’s immersion soon followed William’s, probably no later than early June 1846.\textsuperscript{9} Almost as an aside, and perhaps tongue-in-cheek, Lipscomb said Fanning immersed him in a box while he recovered from typhoid fever. “Had I died of the fever,” he said, “it would have been called a ‘deathbed repentance.’ It was all of my own volition, as no one had spoken to me about it and I sent for Mr. Fanning and told him of my wishes.”\textsuperscript{10}

Though he adequately answered Burnett’s query in two sentences, what he disclosed next demonstrates how he utilized memories of his immersion amid the rebaptism controversy. He set the facts of his baptism in a narrative context, then used it rhetorically to personalize his arguments about the propriety of re-immersion. For David Lipscomb his baptism was not an isolated event performed by certain (or other) individuals with (or without) this (or that) knowledge. The debate was neither hypothetical nor was it an abstraction; it was very personal and he leveraged those personal experiences and memories to press his case. He rehearsed the details he provided to Burnett in their narratival context, which he in turn related to the larger discussion. Lipscomb’s narrative reveals how the circumstances and atmosphere of his childhood and adolescence informed his response to Baptists seeking affiliation with Disciples. It also informed how he regarded rebaptist Disciples who, in his mind, misrepresented Baptists’ knowledge and sincerity.

“My father and mother,” he wrote, “were members of the church of Christ before I was born, and I grew up from infancy in an atmosphere of contest over these questions.”\textsuperscript{11} The Lipscomb’s were of old Virginia Baptist heritage who

\textsuperscript{7} Johnson, 225, states the event remained “fresh in my memory after fifty-eight years.” See Tolbert Fanning’s Aug. 26 letter in “News from the Churches,” Bible Advocate 4 (Sept. 1846): 216.


\textsuperscript{9} On June 17, 1846, Fanning and two faculty members led a group of eighty students on a geological excursion into Kentucky of a few weeks’ duration; see Tolbert Fanning, “Geological Excursion by the Faculty and Students of Franklin College,” Christian Review 3 (Aug. 1846): 186–88. They may have returned by mid to late July to resume the fall session of the school. Student W. H. Hooker returned to school by July 19; see his letter in “News from the Churches,” Bible Advocate 4 (Sept. 1846): 214–15. In 1847 student N. B. Smith was baptized. Shortly after graduating from Franklin College, Smith joined its faculty and married Keren Lipscomb, David and William’s older half-sister; see William Lipscomb, “Biographical Sketch of Prof. N. B. Smith,” Scobey, Franklin College, 192.

\textsuperscript{10} Lipscomb, “Some Recollections,” 649.

\textsuperscript{11} Lipscomb, “Some Recollections,” 649.
by David’s birth in 1831 were excluded as heretics from their Baptist congregation for pursuing the notion that they should read the Bible for themselves and take it alone as their religious authority.12

Seeing his father teach the Bible proved a formative and enduring experience for young David. Granville “seldom let his children go to bed at night without reading a portion of scripture and talking of it to them.”13 In 1846—the summer of Lipscomb’s baptism—Joshua K. Speer proposed Granville’s example as a teacher in the Salem church Sunday school “should be followed by every church in the world.” Speer’s conviction was that “Bro. L[ipscomb] is sowing seed from which a rich harvest will one day be gathered.”14

David Lipscomb was aware his father was baptized to obey God and witnessed his grandmother, Ann Day Lipscomb, in 1842 leave the Baptist Church Bean’s Creek to unite with the Church of Christ near Salem. The daughter of William Cook, a Baptist preacher of Louisa County, Virginia, she united early in life with the Baptist Church in Little River, Virginia. She was not re-immersed when she left the Bean’s Creek for Salem; neither was Granville when he was excluded. His grandmother’s union with the Disciples at Salem, followed in 1844 by his aunt Tappy’s, surely intensified David’s consideration of what his course should be.15

Lipscomb recalled the year (1844–45) he and his brother William spent with their grandfather in Virginia. Out of respect for his father, Granville instructed them “to attend the Sunday School and all the services of the [Baptist] church.” Grandfather Lipscomb reciprocated, encouraging the boys to hear preaching by two Disciples out of “regard for what he thought [Granville] would wish.”16 Their experience among their peers was not so charitable. A keen competitive spirit soon developed among the children over their

15 See Moore, “History of Old Salem,” 963. Regarding his father, Granville: “He wanted to obey God; he saw God required him to be baptized. The Baptists were the only people that baptized. He was baptized among them, not having his attention called to the specific time when remission was promised. But as all Baptists do, he recognized baptism as a part of that service God required to fit man for salvation. As such he submitted to it.” David Lipscomb, “Baptism and Remission of Sins,” GA 49 (March 7, 1907): 152. Regarding Ann Day Lipscomb, see David Lipscomb, “Obituaries,” GA 12 (April 28, 1870): 400–402, and Lipscomb, “Re-baptizing Baptists,” 257; regarding Taphanes Lipscomb Hunt, see Hooper, Crying, 23.
memorization skills. Motivated by a desire to “beat those Virginia boys and girls,” Lipscomb memorized the Gospels and Acts.17

In that Virginia Baptist Sunday school, the teacher of which professed no religion whatsoever, thirteen-year-old David Lipscomb argued for “baptism for remission of sins and refused to go to the ‘mourner’s bench’ at a protracted meeting held during the time of [his] attendance, when many of [his] associates did it.”18 Though it would be nearly two years until he was immersed, David Lipscomb understood then the contention between Disciples and Baptists concerning baptism, remission, and conversion.

Further, “as an indication of the atmosphere in which [he] was brought up” Lipscomb told how he “plagued” his father by calling Billy Woods a liar. Elder William Woods was the Baptist preacher who spearheaded the exclusion of the Lipscombs from the Bean’s Creek Baptist Church in Franklin County, Tennessee. Woods was a near neighbor to the Lipscombs and close friend to Granville in spite of the difficulty at church. David explained how

before I was six years old I had heard much talk about Brother Woods’ false doctrine. I did not distinguish between false doctrine and falsehoods. One day I plagued my father when I stated in his presence that Brother Woods “is such a liar.” Of course all thought I had heard it from him, and it plagued him.19

The following month, in November 1906, Lipscomb appealed again to his youth, stating “I have been disposed to be very forbearing to the position [his position on rebaptism], because when young I was strongly inclined to the position, and believe that a faithful study of God’s word, and especially a more complete drinking into the Spirit of Christ, will lead us to a clearer understanding of God’s dealings with men.”20

Finally, in July 1907, amid a stream of lengthy articles and editorials about rebaptism, Lipscomb answered R. G. Cook from Lafayette, Tennessee, who asked, “Were you ever a member of the Baptist Church, and who baptized you? Some say you were, some say not.” Lipscomb replied, “I gave enough of my history some two or three months ago to shock my modesty, in which this

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18 Lipscomb, “Some Recollections” 649. Lipscomb stressed twice in the article that the teacher “was not a member of any church” and that “he was a man that made no profession of religion.”
question was answered. I was never a Baptist, and was baptized by Tolbert Fanning.”

By the 1830s the Lipscomb family endured a painful separation from their Baptist roots. The incident with William Woods occurred during this time. The commencement of his personal study of the issues in 1843 was framed by his grandmother’s (1842) and aunt’s (1844) affiliation with the Disciples at Salem. By late 1845 he spent a year in Virginia, and in 1846 after a few months at Franklin College his brother was baptized. Lipscomb’s baptism was not an isolated event. He remembered the atmosphere of those formative years as one in which Baptist doctrine was stridently debated; in which the Bible was fervently read, studied, and taught; and one in which Biblical debate was to be tempered with charity, dignity, and honesty.

He returned in his memory to those values and aspirations impressed upon him at an early age. He then explicitly brought them to bear upon the often-pointed debate about rebaptism in the church papers and local congregations. In 1906, sixty years after his baptism, Lipscomb said, “I am willing still to learn every truth from the Baptists that they hold and to accept all obedience to God rendered among them, and do not believe a man, on learning the errors of the Baptists, is required to repudiate what he has believed and done aright when among them. He is only required to give up the errors.”

Theological Context

Lipscomb’s theological commitments about rebaptism hinge first on his view of baptism but ultimately emerge from his understanding of God’s character and nature. For Lipscomb baptism is and ought to be a theocentric act of faith and trust. He challenges as aberrant and dangerous anthropocentric and ecclesiocentric notions of baptism and rebaptism. In the midst of debate, he labors at length to clarify issues and define terms, but the basic doctrinal issue at stake is the character of God.

James Walton Shepherd arranged and edited a collation of forty-seven years of Lipscomb’s articles into a systematic theology that he published in 1913 under the title *Salvation from Sin*. Working from articles published in *Gospel Advocate* and the *Nashville American*, Shepherd utilized “the article containing the fullest discussion of the subject as a base” for each chapter, then supplemented it by taking “every additional argument and thought, and, as best I could, put them in their logical places, so as to get the fullest discussion of the subject possible.” In terms of scope, depth, and time, *Salvation from Sin* very nearly exhausts Lipscomb’s literary output on the topics covered. For these

24 At the time of its publication, Shepherd intended to prepare a second volume from Lipscomb’s writings on “the duties, activities, and blessings of the Christian life”;
reasons it is the first and best starting point for any discussion of David Lipscomb’s doctrinal and theological commitments.

Of utmost importance to Lipscomb is to love God with all heart, soul, and mind, a commandment he says “comes first in time and importance to man,” which

lies at the foundation of all the service man renders to God; and without this as the inspiring spirit, man cannot render any service or duty to God. When a man does an act of service because God commands it, and he does it to honor and please God, in his service he embraces all secondary and minor aims and purposes. When he fails to be moved by this design and purpose and does things from a motive of good to self, he nullifies all service and causes it to be rejected as true service to God. 25

This basic principle governs Lipscomb’s baptismal theology. Submitting to baptism is an act of love toward God in that it is an act that respects God’s command to be baptized. It is an act of faith in God that places one in a condition wherein God forgives and remits sin because in being immersed one exhibits love for and trust in God. “Baptism,” Lipscomb claimed,

as an act of faith is a declaration of distrust of self and of trust in God. It is the act in which the believer declares distrust in self and commits himself—heart, soul, and body—to God. It is not a work of the man. So far from it, it is a solemn declaration that he is dead and not able to work or do anything of himself; he henceforth commits himself to God. He will let God work through him. To follow the law of faith is for man to do nothing of his own, but to submit through faith, with fear and trembling, to the will of God—to walk in the works of God. To do God’s work allows no room for boasting. It is to seek blessing in walking in the works of God; it is to receive blessing and strength from God in God’s appointed way. 26

In the same 1883 *Gospel Advocate* article in which he appealed to his own desire to obey God in baptism, Lipscomb clarified that the point at issue in the rebaptism debate was

ibid. “Were I to go over these writings to-day, setting forth the reasons why and the ground on which oneness in Christ should exist,” Lipscomb wrote in the introduction, “I would scarcely know how or which sentences to change” (David Lipscomb, introduction, *Salvation from Sin*, viii).

25 Ibid., vii, citing Matt. 22:37–38. A concise statement of the principle appears at “Queries,” *GA* 46 (Feb. 11, 1904): 84, and in the editorial “Suggestions for Serious Thought,” *GA* 41 (Aug. 10, 1899): 504. He pointedly articulates it throughout 1907 in several articles cited below: “I believe there is one motive that must be the ruling, controlling, ever-present motive in all service to God, without which no service is acceptable to him. That is, we must do the service in the name of Jesus, the Lord” . . . and “it pleases the truth beyond all controversy that God is best pleased with the service that is rendered him at great sacrifice, from love of him, without any promise of blessing. Job said: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust him.” That is the service God loves” (David Lipscomb, “Rebaptism Reviewed,” *GA* 49 [Dec. 12, 1907]: 793).

26 Salvation from Sin, 206–7.
whether one who believes in Christ and desires to obey him in his ordinance of baptism, if baptized by a Baptist, Methodist, Romanist, or a Mormon for that matter, is acceptably baptized. Whenever this question is asked, brethren run off to argue whether men who under excitement are baptized, merely to get into the Baptist or Methodist church, or to go with a crowd, are scripturally baptized. That is not the question; no one ever said such a baptism was worth a cent, that I ever heard. That kind of a person baptized by the Savior himself, would not have been benefitted.”

Lipscomb further said “it is not who did or may do the baptizing; but is the subject prepared for it? If he is not, a baptism administered by the apostle Paul is no scriptural baptism.” What then, makes a subject fit for immersion? For Lipscomb since the leading purpose for baptism “should be to honor and glorify God by obeying him,” one should have this end in mind to be adequately prepared and fit for baptism.

In Salvation from Sin Lipscomb argued at length how this constitutes acceptable obedience. The great principle underlying his conception of all service to God is that obedience is rooted in faith and trust stemming from whatever knowledge one possesses. Faith and knowledge grow symbiotically, each feeding the other. As an example he described a woman born into a Presbyterian family, sprinkled as an infant, who came to understand that “it is God’s will that the believer should be baptized” and

moved by the desire of fulfilling all righteousness, of keeping the commands of Jesus, just as he desired to keep his Father’s commands, she was baptized. She had failed as yet to see in this reading that baptism is for the remission of sins. She did see one great scriptural reason why she should be baptized. God required it. Led by that, acting promptly on the light she had, she was baptized. She was led by God to baptism. Who dare say that she was not pardoned because she did not see that her baptism was for the remission of sins? In both cases something other than the honor of God

28 Ibid.
30 Salvation from Sin, 227. Lipscomb may have had Mrs. R. H. Bridgewater in mind. Bridgewater, a Presbyterian, was admitted to Nashville’s South College Street Christian Church by transfer of membership Nov. 1, 1888. See below for further discussion.
31 Salvation from Sin, 229. See also David Lipscomb, “What Is Baptist Baptism?” GA 49 (April 25, 1907): 265: “Both these baptisms [that is, the Baptist baptism submitted
drives baptism. Such desires are an anthropocentric litmus test for adjudicating the propriety of a candidate’s baptism. Fundamentally for Lipscomb baptism is a God-focused act. “It would distress me much,” he said
to think my acceptance with God depended upon my understanding the promise of the Holy Spirit. I think I understand it; but so many good and honest men, my equals in all the elements of scriptural intelligence, differ with me in this point that it would distress me to think my salvation depended upon my understanding being correct, lest I be mistaken.  

Lipscomb’s conception of the character and nature of God undergirds this argument and explains why the sort of obedience he argues for—incomplete and weak yet trusting in what God said—is acceptable. For Lipscomb God is revealed to us in the Bible in what he does as well as in what is said concerning him. To learn him, then, we must study God in what he is revealed as doing as well as in what is said of him; and to form a true estimate of God, we must study him in all his attributes and characteristics. To study him only in the light of his attributes is to obtain a partial, one-sided, and false view of God. Such a view is misleading.

Lipscomb understood God as the one who is revealed in actions: God created all things, who is omnipresent, is Spirit, is abundant in loving-kindness, who will not clear the guilty, who has righteousness and justice as the foundation of His throne, dwells with the humble and contrite, and uses the wicked to destroy his enemies and punish the unfaithful.

He brought God’s character to bear on the rebaptism issue in an 1894 exchange with Austin McGary. To explain how baptism is where a seeker receives a gift from God, Lipscomb stated,

God bestows remission of sins, as a gift of his grace, on man. He has chosen to bestow it in baptism. Man must receive the gift where God bestows it, or he deprives himself of the gift. A gift must be bestowed and received willingly. If man

to in order to ‘get into the Baptist church’ and the rebaptist baptism ‘done to please those who believe in rebaptism’] ignore the authority of Christ or the scriptures, and are not acceptable to God.” Similar comments are at David Lipscomb, “The Purpose of Baptism,” GA 47 (Jan. 26, 1905): 56.

32 Ibid, 234. For an account of Lipscomb’s willingness to admit his shortcomings and misunderstandings, see S. H. Hall, Sixty-Five Years in the Pulpit, or Compound Interest in Religion (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1959), 13–14. Hall came to Nashville Bible School prejudiced against Lipscomb’s position on rebaptism and was shocked by Lipscomb’s fairness in dealing with Baptists, rebaptists and fellow Disciples. Hall grew ashamed of his attitudes after seeing Lipscomb deal with the biblical text and controversial issues. See also similar memories in S. H. Hall, “A Father in Israel Has Gone Home,” GA 59 (Dec. 6, 1917): 1179.

33 Shepherd, Salvation from Sin, 27.

34 Each clause is a subheading in the chapter on God in Salvation from Sin under which Lipscomb provides several biblical texts that reveal that aspect of God’s mighty acts and divine nature.
is not willing to receive it, it is not a gift, but a burden forced on him. Hence, to be baptized for the remission of sins is to receive the grace of God where God bestows it. To refuse to be baptized is to refuse the gift.\textsuperscript{35}

McGary replied, “the Baptists are not willing to receive the gift where God has chosen to bestow it” and countered with another of Lipscomb’s illustrations to prove him inconsistent. Likening the word of God to physical food, Lipscomb earlier said the “power and efficacy of that word can only be appropriated by the heart as that word is understood, digested, and assimilated to the spirit and wants of the soul.”\textsuperscript{36} If the word is not understood and assimilated into the heart, it is like undigested food that is of no avail to the body. McGary concluded that, since Baptists refuse to accept remission in baptism, they are like those who pass undigested food wherefrom they receive no benefit.

To this Lipscomb admitted that if, indeed, any Baptist refused to accept a gift where God bestowed it, that one was “not a child of God. I will not differ with McGary about that.” He went on to say, though, that

Baptists would say this is a misrepresentation of them. They say they are willing and glad to accept of remission when and wherever God will bestow it. They mistake the place where he has promised to give it, mistaking this they believe that God does bestow it where he promised it. But with this mistake as to where he promised it, they go forward in the path of obedience; and when they travel the road of obedience until they reach the point where God has promised to give it, will God refuse to bestow it because they mistook the point at which he had promised it? I say, No.\textsuperscript{37}

Citing the examples of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, “the ancient worthies, all the apostles” Lipscomb said they all “misapprehended the nature and meaning of many of [God’s] leading statements and promises, but went forward in obedience to his will.” Denying the possibility of perfect understanding or obedience,\textsuperscript{38} Lipscomb appealed to God’s nature as a theological center of gravity underpinning a proper understanding of baptism within a person’s overall attitude toward God. He concluded,

we must act on what knowledge and faith we have, and it will grow. God rejects no service done in obedience to his law because we did not wait to learn all the blessings and promises connected with the obedience. Jesus will reject man at the last day because he did not do the will of my Father who is in heaven. But there is no intimation a soul will be rejected because he did the will before he knew all the blessings promised. This question receives an importance because it is based upon a misapprehension of God’s character. It makes of God a bitter, vindictive being,
anxious to damn those seeking to obey him. Such a conception is fatal to true faith in God, and begets a like spirit in man. 39

Lipscomb maintained that the rebaptism position reflected assumptions about the character of God that necessarily led to harmful ends. The rebaptism premise must be that “God rejects all service to him unless the person doing it understands all the promises and blessings connected with the service.” In such a scenario the nature of a person’s relationship to God is no longer one of faith; rather it becomes a transaction grounded in human knowledge and performance. “Such an idea,” Lipscomb says,

makes God a monster and does greater violence to the character of God than any teaching of the Baptists known to me. . . . The great evil of the position is, it arises from a misconception of the character of God. We are made like the being we worship. A distorted idea of the character of God exerts a hurtful reflex influence on our own spiritual characters and prevents our forming characters in harmony with the true character of God. This can only work evil in the world. 40

The practical outworking of such a conception of God’s nature is that if it does not push its adherents to despair it necessarily entices them to assume they have no faults because God allows no faults. “This idea of God,” he says,

has a tendency to make us think we are perfect, know everything about the teachings of the Bible. It has a tendency to make bitter partisans instead of gentle, forbearing Christians, anxious to acknowledge all truth in others, and to help them and be helped by them to a better and fuller knowledge of God’s will. I pray God we may all realize our own weaknesses and infirmities. Then we will sympathize with the weak and erring, as we need the sympathy and help of God. 41

Ecclesial Context

On January 1, 1888, South College Street Christian Church (Nashville, TN) was set in order with elders and deacons and resolved to meet weekly in their new modest brick meetinghouse. On that date David and Margaret

39 Ibid, 37.
Lipscomb transferred membership from Church Street Christian Church in downtown, and he began thirty years of service as an elder.\textsuperscript{42}

A substantial membership record exists from 1887 through the middle 1930s. The ledger begins November 13, 1887, when about one hundred members moved their membership from Church Street Christian Church, including Lipscomb’s fellow charter elders, William H. Timmons and J. Claude Martin.\textsuperscript{43} It lists each member by last name followed by the date and method of addition (whether by letter, transfer, or baptism with occasional notation of the evangelist who performed the baptism).\textsuperscript{44} This archival material reveals how the congregation received members across the duration of Lipscomb’s tenure as elder.

From November 13, 1887, to Lipscomb’s death in 1917, there were 1109 additions.\textsuperscript{45} Nearly all either transferred from Christian Churches or were simply listed as added by baptism. Forty-one transferred from Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian bodies. Of these, thirty-one are noted simply as having transferred “from Baptist.”\textsuperscript{46} One came “by confession from Baptist.

\textsuperscript{42} “After Three Decades,” \textit{The Daily American}, 14 Nov. 1887, 8. The congregation began in 1857 when Lipscomb preached to three women and a boy. They met in rented quarters until 1887 and the make-up of the congregation during this period remains largely unknown.

\textsuperscript{43} Lipscomb, Martin and Timmons did all of the public preaching and teaching for most of ten years (protracted meetings excepted) for the congregation. See David Lipscomb, “J. C. Martin,” \textit{GA} 54 (Jan. 25, 1912): 111; and H. Leo Boles, “Biographical Sketch of J. C. Martin,” \textit{GA}, 73 (May 14, 1931): 584–85.

\textsuperscript{44} [Handwritten: Lindsley Avenue Church of Christ, formerly South College St. Church] \textit{The Standard Church Register and Record} (Cincinnati: Standard Pub. Co., n.d. The first entries in this ledger correspond to the date of the first service, described in the \textit{Daily American} article cited above, held Nov. 13, 1887. There is no indication in this ledger that any prior record books or membership list was consulted or even existed. For the Lipscomb’s date of membership transfer, see their entry in the L section. For the date of his appointment as an elder, see “Register of Elders” after the list of members, p. 106. With William H. Timmons and Sallie E. Baugh, he served as a trustee of the church property. Mrs. Baugh served as trustee and treasurer through the end of 1888.

\textsuperscript{45} According to these records, David Lipscomb performed only one of these 1000 baptisms: on Oct. 21, 1888, he immersed Mrs. Emaline Thompson. For Lipscomb’s comments about what he would say to one who “tells us he was baptized to obey God,” see David Lipscomb, “Correspondence,” \textit{GA} 23 (Sept. 22, 1881): 597.

\textsuperscript{46} Susie Allen (Nov. 13, 1887), Mrs. Alice A. Baker (Oct. 4, 1889), Mrs. E. J. Bostick (Oct. 6, 1889), William Burnett (Nov. 22, 1891), W. M. Chatham and Alcinda Chatham (March 21, 1889), Mrs. C. J. Cook and [illegible] Cook (April 5, 1889), Edward Chatham (Nov. 22, 1891), Lizzie B. Foster (Oct. 6, 1889), Miss Nannie Graham (Oct. 2, 1888), W. B. Garrett (March 15, 1894), Mrs. Mary B. Hollis (April 7, 1889), Mrs. Billie Lamoreaux (April 22, 1889), [Arena J.?] Lamb (Oct. 11, 1889), J. L. Ligon (Oct. 16, 1891), P. D. Mason (April 15, 1889), Geo. W. Martin (July 1892), Nimrod Price (Sept. 1, 1889), Mrs. Alonzo Peel (April 19, 1890), John L. Peace (Sept. 28, 1891), J. F. Pentecost (March 25, 1894), J. P. Sanders (Sept. 30, 1889), Mrs. [?] Taylor (May 4, 1890), Mrs. M. J. Watson (April 9, 1889), Mrs. Eliza Wrightsman (April 27, 1890),
Eight were Methodists, one of whom was baptized by J. P. Grigg; another was "formerly a member of the Christian Church, became a Methodist, then received back into the Christian Church." One was Presbyterian and one is noted simply as "Cumberland," which I interpret as meaning Cumberland Presbyterian. In practice, the South College Street Christian Church received into its membership those who had been immersed while among Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian congregations. In all but one of those cases, no re-immersion was noted. At the same time, those who requested re-immersion to honor God were welcomed. The stories of two South College Street families (the McPherson and Allen families) and one episode of J. D. Tant's preaching in Nashville in 1899 illustrate the climate.

On February 12, 1888, six weeks after David Lipscomb became an elder, Joseph and Bettie McPherson transferred their membership from the Church Street congregation. Joseph was twenty-six years old; two years earlier, in November 1885, he had heard T. B. Larimore preach a series of meetings at the Church Street.
Church Street Church. McPherson "professed religion and joined the Missionary Baptist Church at the age of 17." Hearing Larimore, "after a careful and prayerful consideration of the matter," he responded to the invitation. Since McPherson had been immersed, Lin Cave, the minister at Church Street, told him, "we do not require you to be immersed again, if you are satisfied with your baptism." Joseph answered,

I am trying ... to get out of sectarianism. I want to do just what the Scriptures command one in my condition. I believe with my whole heart. I am penitent. I want to confess Christ and be baptized in His name for the remission of my sins. I did this and came up out of the water of baptism knowing that, I had a "thus saith the Lord," for what I had done.53

McPherson began preaching in the 1890s, focusing especially on poorer sections of Nashville and Davidson County. A letter carrier by trade, he often walked a dozen or more miles during the day and preached nightly in gospel meetings of five to six weeks' duration. He established at least fourteen congregations in Nashville, helping nine construct meeting houses, and baptized at least two thousand persons. J. D. Tant recalled in 1932 that at the time of the meeting described below "Joe McPherson was the only preacher in Nashville who taught the truth on the rebaptism question."54

Susie Allen was raised in a devout Baptist home in Nashville. Her husband, Jacob, was an equally devout Methodist. That they could not find unity in religion grieved them, though they agreed "the 'Campbellites' were not even a

53 All quotations in this paragraph are from "Joe McPherson, the Mail-Carrier Preacher," typescript, A. M. Burton Papers, University Archives, Beaman Library, Lipscomb University. For reports of Larimore's meeting, see “Items and Personals” sections for GA 27 (Nov. 11, 18, 25, 1885): 714, 722 and 747, respectively. The meeting resulted in at least fifty additions to the Church Street congregation. Larimore preached at the dedication of the new South College Street meetinghouse; see "After Three Decades," 8.

respectable people.” In time they undertook a “careful, prayerful, and painstaking investigation of the Holy Scriptures” about which time they heard J. Claude Martin preach in a rented hall. Both went forward and “accepted ‘the Bible and the Bible alone’ as the Guide.” They placed membership at South College Street on November 13, 1887, at the first service. At some point Jacob was immersed by James A. Harding at the South College Street Church. There is no indication from the church records, though, of his immersion; rather, both Jacob and Susie are stated as having transferred from Central Baptist Church.

Jacob soon began preaching in an “extra kind” way, “with a very great sympathy for people who are in error.” In 1892, with James A. Harding and J. H. Mead, he led a swarm from South College to form Green Street Christian Church. Jacob served as an elder there for years, preaching “under tents, in private homes and anywhere he could reach the people.” His oldest son, James A. Allen, edited Gospel Advocate from 1923 to 1930 and Apostolic Times from 1931 to 1954.

J. D. Tant preached a series of gospel meetings at Nashville’s Carroll Street Christian Church in the spring of 1899. Joe McPherson served Carroll Street as an elder. Tant sent this report to the Gospel Advocate:

The zeal of the members of Carroll Street Church soon took effect upon the surrounding congregations. Brother J. G. Allen, who preaches for the Church of Christ on Green Street, dismissed during our meeting, and almost all of their

56 James A. Allen, “J. G. Allen,” Apostolic Times 7 (Oct. 1938): 54. This was likely sometime before 1887 when South Nashville Christian Church still met in rented quarters.
57 The South College Street congregation in the 1890s had among its membership several who would later impact Churches of Christ in significant ways. Besides the Lipscomb, McPherson and Allen families, on Feb. 7, 1892, J. A. Harding, Mrs. Pattie, Leon, and Miss Woodie placed membership at South College Street, bringing with them letters from their congregation in Winchester, KY. Soon thereafter they led a swarm to establish the Green Street Church. Charles Elias Webb Dorris placed membership at South College Street, by letter, in the fall of 1892 when he entered Nashville Bible School.
61 The following account is taken from Yater Tant, J. D. Tant—Texas Preacher, A Biography (Lufkin, TX: The Gospel Guardian Co., 1958), 217–19. Carroll Street Church also swarmed from South College Street in the early 1890s and was located about two blocks from the South College meetinghouse. The two congregations reunited in 1920, taking the name Lindsley Avenue Church of Christ.
members attended every service, helping in song and prayer. Brother Moore,\(^{62}\) who preaches at South College Street also began to dismiss all meetings, and he and many of the members became regular attendants and aided in the interest of the meeting. We could note from ten to thirty preachers in the congregation each night, willing to help in every way.

It was estimated that more than one hundred preachers attended our series of meetings in Nashville. Among Tennessee’s noted preachers whom I call to memory who attended were F. D. Srygley, F. B. Srygley, F. W. Smith, J. W. Shepherd, J. R. Williams, L. R. Sowell, W. L. Logan, S. R. Logue, J. W. Grant, James Dunn, J. P. Grigg, R. W. Norwood, and many other earnest, godly preachers whose names I do not remember. Added to all these, we also had in attendance David Lipscomb and J. A. Harding, chiefs among sinners in opposing the rebaptism hobby. One is now willing to ask, ‘Are you a rebaptist?’ To this I answer as did Paul to the charge of heresy, ‘After the way which they call heresy (rebaptism), so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets.’ For it has been generally known for twelve years that I have been considered a rebaptist of the rebaptists, even almost spatting with A. McGary as to which should sit on the cow-catcher of the hobby and get there first.

Yes, I had the so-called ‘rebaptism’ for breakfast, dinner, and supper; and in almost every sermon I told where the church was when Alexander Campbell was born, and impressed upon the people the necessity of scriptural obedience, and that there was one church (and only one), one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. To all of these sermons, so far as I could learn, Brother Lipscomb and Brother Harding said ‘Amen’. Someone is ready to say: ‘Harding and Lipscomb were converted and have given up Methodist and Baptist baptism’. No, brother; I want to say with due respect to all, no one can give up a thing he never held to. I found that Harding and Lipscomb condemned Methodist and Baptist baptism as bitterly as I do. Here is where the great trouble has been and how the breach has been greatly widened: we have tried to force those brethren to accept and hold a position they have never believed, neither do they advocate the same. Both were as willing as I to affirm that baptism as held and practiced by Baptists and Methodists is unscriptural; but they claim that all Christians belonging to those churches are in there through obedience to God’s word, not in obedience to the sectarian doctrine. In this matter I thought these brethren inconsistent in their practice, as I claim that Baptists and Methodists do not mix enough truth with their doctrines to save any one; but they thought I was extreme in not giving Baptists and Methodists credit for the good they do. In all these differences I am now convinced, as I have been for a number of years, that had all on both sides had more love, exercised more patience, and been more careful in words that expressed our differences, the bitterness, envy, and strife which have existed to a great extent would have been unknown. Our differences have never been so great as our writings convey to the world they are, when we understand one another properly. While it is considered that Lipscomb and Harding are extreme on the one hand, and I on the other, yet, after my association with them, I think they both love me more than before and I can truthfully say that after having more knowledge of the zeal and godliness and work of those dear brethren, my love for them is far greater than ever in the past; and I am sure that many who regard those

\(^{62}\) Cornelius A. Moore.
brethren today as enemies of the cause and not in accord with the word of God, are greatly mistaken.63

At a time when the rebaptism issue grew warm in the pages of Gospel Advocate and Firm Foundation, seekers after truth found in Nashville’s South College Street Christian Church an environment that stressed God-honoring obedience. Any believer immersed to honor God was welcome; likewise, any believer re-immersed to please God was equally welcomed and put to work exercising his or her gifts in the congregation. Sectarianism, whether inside or outside Disciple contexts, was criticized. Good-faith efforts to serve God, proclaim the gospel and follow its direction were also honored and encouraged. The membership ledgers evince a dimension of Lipscomb’s leadership in the local, congregational setting that is simply unavailable in the pages of Gospel Advocate. Like the narratives of his baptism, it personalizes and contextualizes the positions he published in the church papers. These sources shed light on his practice and the practice of those he led through weekly teaching, counsel, and pastoral care.

Conclusion

David Lipscomb remembered his baptism as one moment in a larger narrative shaped by those values and commitments he and his immediate family cherished. Available evidence documents he did not waver from a conviction formed early in life: to love and honor God, as God, by obedience from the heart is the overarching motivating factor for every act of service. He clarified his position on rebaptism by affirming a theocentric doctrine of baptism. He thought a performance-focused immersion was no baptism as all, regardless of attending circumstances. Such an act denied God’s gracious nature by redefining baptism away from its biblical meaning as a dependent and obedient embodiment of trust in a patient, gracious God into a self-serving act of confidence in one’s own doctrinal understanding, sure to result in arrogance and intolerance toward the weak. Available evidence indicates he pursued this conviction in practice in the Nashville congregation he served sixty years as a teacher and thirty years as an elder.