

What We Might Have Done Differently in the Past*

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Members of the stream of the Stone-Campbell Movement now known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) might have done three things different in relation to divisive forces in the history of the Movement.

First, we might have eschewed “ecclesiastical politics” in favor of education and the discussion of issues. Two very different instances come to mind: one related to the Disciples of Christ/Churches of Christ division and the other to the Disciples of Christ/Independent Christian Churches division.

The first case was the adoption by the American Christian Missionary Society in 1863 of a resolution declaring allegiance to the government of the United States, alluded to by Doug Foster. The American Christian Missionary Society had been organized at the first general gathering of the Stone-Campbell Movement, held in Cincinnati in 1849. Throughout the Civil War, the Society continued to meet annually. However, since the Society’s meetings were held in Cincinnati, only members of churches from the North were able to attend.

Prior to the War, the Society had assiduously avoided taking a stand on sectional issues, though the issue of slavery and its possible ramifications had continued to be discussed through the periodicals of the Movement. Once hostilities commenced, there was pressure in the

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North for church bodies to declare their support of the Federal union. A resolution asking Disciples everywhere “to do all in their power to sustain the proper and constitutional authorities of the Union” was introduced at the 1861 meeting of the Society, but was ruled out of order by vote of the Society. A ten-minute recess was called, and David S. Burnet called an ad hoc meeting to order, which proceeded to pass the resolution with only one dissenting vote. Two years later, in 1863, the Society, meeting again in Cincinnati, without any Southern members present, passed the following resolution by a substantial majority:

Resolved, That we tender our sympathies to our brave soldiers in the fields, who are defending us from the attempts of armed traitors to overthrow our Government, and also to those bereaved and rendered desolate by the ravages of war.

Historians from all streams of the Movement have pointed to the 1863 resolution as an important factor in solidifying opposition to missionary societies among the Southern Churches of Christ which, by the end of the century, had distinguished themselves from the Disciples of Christ. Northern members of the Society, who had refused in 1861 to declare their support for the Union as the Society, might have steadfastly refused to speak to the issue of allegiance to the Union in behalf of the Society, while seeking ways to facilitate informed consideration of the responsibilities of Christians to the Federal government.

A second instance when Disciples might have eschewed ecclesiastical politics in favor of education and discussion of issues was the controversy over the practice of open membership on the mission field. Henry Webb described the political strategizing that went into the planning of the 1926 Memphis Convention that confirmed for many opponents of open membership their suspicions regarding the integrity of the UCMS leadership and led them to devote their resources to missions “independent” of the UCMS. Disciples’ historian Mark Toulouse has shown that while honoring the missionaries’ right to private judgement, the leadership of the UCMS did oppose the practice of open membership, believing that membership practices of UCMS missionaries in the field should reflect the views of the majority of the North American constituency. In addition, Toulouse has shown that the UCMS leadership discouraged discussion of the issue of the practice of open membership in the mission field, believing that the practice was

“divisive” and would reduce the receipts of the Society.¹ It is hard to imagine that open discussion of the issue of the practice of open membership in the mission field that many of the missionaries desired would have proved more divisive than the policies followed by the UCMS leadership.

Second, we might have paid more attention to the Gospel. By the Gospel, I mean the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Alexander Campbell stated the relationship between the Gospel and Christian union in his classic essay “Foundation of Christian Union,” which he published in 1835 as a chapter in *The Christian System*. “Nothing,” Campbell wrote, “is essential to the union of Christians but the Apostles’ teaching or testimony.”² Readers have sometimes assumed that by his phrase “the Apostles’ teaching or testimony” Campbell meant the “ancient order of things.” Hence, it has sometimes been assumed that Campbell believed that nothing is essential to the union of Christians but the restoration of the ancient order. On the contrary, Campbell used the phrase “the Apostles’ teaching or testimony” to refer to the Gospel, the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. For Campbell, a “fact” was a deed, something that had been done. Facts or deeds disclosed the character of the doer. The Apostles’ teaching or testimony was their report of what God had done in Jesus Christ. Campbell observed that to “enumerate the gospel facts would be to narrate all that is recorded of the sayings and doings of Jesus Christ from his birth to his coronation in the heavens.” They were, however, “concentrated in a few prominent ones, which group together all the love of God in the gift of his Son.” Campbell continued, “He died for our sins—he was buried in the grave—he rose from the dead for our justification—and is ascended to the skies to prepare mansions for his disciples—comprehend the whole, or are the heads of the chapters which narrate the love of God and display his moral majesty and glory to our view.”³ For Campbell, the deeds of God in Jesus Christ, recorded in Scripture, “are the proof, the argument, or the demonstration, of that regenerating proposition which presents God and Love as two names for one idea.”⁴ Campbell argued that as hate begets hate, persons who believe that God hates them cannot love God. Believing that as we become aware of our sin, we become convinced that God must hate us, Campbell asserted that only the message of God’s love can reconcile sinners to God. Moreover, he believed that only persons who are reconciled to God can be reconciled

to one another. Thus, for Campbell, the message of the Gospel—the message of God’s love for us—alone has the power to unite the church.

To be sure, Campbell sought the union of Christians through the restoration of the apostolic or ancient order of the church revealed in scripture. He believed that the ministry of the New Testament church and the apostolic practices of believer’s immersion for remission of sins and every Lord’s Day observance of the Lord’s Supper were powerful means of declaring God’s love for us made known in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus for Campbell, restoration of the ancient order, which would further communication of the Gospel, would lead to Christian union. Nevertheless, he did not make restoration of the ancient order the “foundation” of Christian union. Christian union was built by faith in the Gospel.

If we had paid more attention to the Gospel, we would have demonstrated greater love for others, including others in the Stone-Campbell Movement with whom we have disagreed. Doug Foster spared us examples of the disrespectful language that members of the Churches of Christ have sometimes used in referring to others in the Movement. Following his lead, I will forgo rehearsing the disrespectful language that Disciples have sometimes used in referring to others in the Movement, except to note that when Disciples have been disrespectful of others in the Movement they have often suggested that the persons with whom they disagreed were lacking in education and refinement. This is not the language of love. This is probably not the language that we would employ upon rising from the Lord’s Table.

Third, we might have given more attention to our Stone-Campbell tradition. That tradition has two foci—union and restoration. There are different ways that the relation of these foci can be conceived. I have just suggested that for Alexander Campbell restoration served the Gospel which, in turn, served Christian union. In any case, it cannot be denied that union and restoration are both part of our tradition.

I believe that Disciples have not paid enough attention to the theme of unity. This statement may surprise some Disciples. Indeed, we pride ourselves on being that stream of the Stone-Campbell Movement that has been most committed to Christian unity. Christian unity, however, is more than cordial relations with groups that share our social and intellectual location. Had we paid more attention to the theme of unity in our tradition, I do not believe that we would have

responded in some of the ways that we have to divisive forces in our history.

I also believe that Disciples have not paid enough attention to the theme of restoration. Indeed, it has been popular for more than a generation for Disciples to say that we have rejected the restoration principle, and that we no longer believe that it can serve the goal of Christian unity. This is not surprising. Others in the Movement who have separated from us have claimed that we violated or failed to uphold some aspect of the ancient order and that, for that reason, they could no longer be in fellowship with us. Given our experience of schism in the Movement, many Disciples have concluded that restoration is an alienating rather than unifying principle. However, to reject the restoration principle because of our experiences of schism in the Movement, is to throw out the baby with the bath water. After all, restoration of the ancient order is only another term for apostolicity. If the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ contained in Scripture is not the norm for the life and witness of the church, what is? To be sure, the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ contained in Scripture must be interpreted in relation to contemporary cultures. By claiming to reject the restoration principle, we have given others in the Movement the impression that we have rejected the authority of Scripture. Though this may be true of some individuals, this is not true of Disciples as a whole or of the Disciples' leadership. By giving more attention to the restoration theme, we would have helped others in the Movement to see more clearly that we, too, are a people who seek to live in continuity with the apostolic witness to what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Endnotes

¹ Mark G. Toulouse, "Practical Concern and Theological Neglect: The UCMS and the Open Membership Controversy," in D. Newell Williams, ed. *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples' Relation to American Culture, 1880-1989* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 213-224.

² *The Christian System: In Reference to the Union of Christians and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity as Plead in the Current Reformation*, 4th ed. (Cincinnati: H. S. Bosworth, 1863), 107.

³ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴ *Ibid.*

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