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# The Stone-Campbell Movement in Canada

CLAUDE COX (WITH INPUT FROM STAN LITKE)

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**M**eaford, Ontario is a hundred miles northwest of Toronto, on Lake Huron—the terminus of the rail line. Population: 4,000. 1950s. Grade six. Miss Babbington, my teacher, asks me where we go to church. I tell her, as I recall, “the Church of Christ.” She says, “Oh, the Disciples Church.” And that’s the way the congregation was known in the community from the time of its inception, 1848—or as “the Christian Church,” or as the “Church of Christ.” Somehow “the Disciples” came up in family conversation, and I learned the word “diagressives” [sic]. Now, my great-uncle’s brother was a Disciples minister, so our family connection, like many, overflowed the Great Division (1906) that increasingly led to two different worlds of congregational life. They did not usually cross paths in southern Ontario; no friendly talk.

## **CANADA**

At the time of the American Civil War, Canada was not yet a country. Confederation in 1867 brought together the four provinces that would constitute the nascent Dominion of Canada: Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. This recognized two continuing realities: British parliamentary democracy and a strong francophone, usually Roman Catholic, presence. The populations of these provinces are huddled along the American border because the country, so vast, is largely too cold to live in.

In the early part of the nineteenth century waves of immigrants came to Canada, attracted by the available land of the New World. Among these were Highland Scots, Baptists, who had been exposed to and converted to the primitivist views of the Haldanes. They arrived early in the century and settled in the English-speaking areas, bringing with them their “non-conformist” and “independent” approach to the Bible. The British, my ancestors (from Somersetshire), also came, hardy people, open to new ideas, resilient in character. Some of these Brits came as Disciples from the Old Country. These pioneers were joined by thousands of United Empire Loyalists, “loyal” to the Crown of England as America became a republic. As a result of this experience of dislocation they were suspicious of republican ideas and the American theologies that might accompany them.

Indeed, the ruling (Anglican) Family Compact encouraged Scottish immigration after the War of 1812–1815 in order to counteract American influence.

## **BEGINNINGS ACROSS THE COUNTRY**

Canada, like the United States, was settled by Europeans from east to west. (First Nations peoples had already been here for many thousands of years.) The oldest congregation to identify later with the Campbell-Stone movement may be the Cross Roads Church on Prince Edward Island (P.E.I.), which predates 1810. At that time John R. Stewart organized a little church, but others had met in homes before that, according to Reuben Butchart. A few years later they were joined by Alexander Crawford, “an educated man and



consecrated preacher.”<sup>1</sup> Both were converts of the Haldanes in Scotland; Crawford was the first person to baptize by immersion on P.E.I. The churches established on the Island in the nineteenth century continue today as a historic presence. Shortly after Cross Roads, in 1815, a congregation formed at River John, Nova Scotia. Its leader, James Murray, had also been baptized, in a Scottish Baptist church in Scotland, before his emigration in 1811, and settlement at River John in 1813. Such groups of people formed an early, important presence in Nova Scotia, in such places as West Gore, where a fine Disciples meetinghouse still stands, built in 1851.

The story of P.E.I. and Nova Scotia was repeated in Ontario, where groups of Haldane-influenced and -taught immigrants, some leaders already ordained, settled west of Toronto around Guelph, along the north shore of Lake Erie, Toronto and the Niagara Peninsula. Groups of Scottish Baptist-led congregants were meeting by about 1820. For example, James Black was baptized in Scotland in 1817 and emigrated to southwestern Ontario in 1820; and Donald McVicar, a Haldane agent and ordained Baptist preacher, came to the same area in 1818. By the early 1830s some of these reformers were reading Campbell’s *Millennial Harbinger*. Others, of the Christian Connection along the north shore of Lake Ontario, were reading Stone’s *Christian Messenger*.

The story of these restorationist groups might have unfolded differently if, in 1834, a crucial vote had gone the other way. It was in 1832 that the Stone and Campbell groups ostensibly united in America, and two years later there was a vote at the Christian Connection Conference of Upper Canada, meeting at Whitby, east of Toronto, to do the same. The tie vote was broken by the Chairman with a “No.” The Conference, tied to the Connection in the northeast, numbered “about 20 churches, 20 preachers and a membership of 1,200.”<sup>2</sup> The Connection was an American initiative but, beyond that, its theology was not Scottish Baptist nor quite that of Campbell. What might have been, had the Chairman voted “Yes” and the two groups had merged? Another decisive event occurred in 1844: Stone died. For the Canadian Restorationists this meant that Campbell was the dominant mentor of the movement, as these Canadian groups grew closer to their American cousins. Further, Bethany was much closer than Kentucky, and Campbell even made a trip across southern Ontario in 1855. That is why, for Canada, the nomenclature “Campbell-Stone,” instead of the now preferred “Stone-Campbell,” is more appropriate.

## THE WEST

Congregations in western Canada emerged after the task of nation-building, after the provinces of Manitoba (1870), British Columbia (1871), Saskatchewan and Alberta (1905) joined the Confederation. The churches of Manitoba and Saskatchewan are mainly the result of settlers moving from Ontario and taking with them their religious tradition. The first of these met at Portage la Prairie, west of Winnipeg, in 1881. It wasn’t until 1885 that the Canadian Pacific Railway extended to British Columbia, so travel to the West before that time was difficult.

However, the churches of Alberta and British Columbia reflect an increasing American influence in the Canadian Church. The first church established in Alberta, at Nanton, was founded by American settlers from Missouri in 1904. In 1905, Carl Bergman arrived from Iowa and was instrumental in the establishment of several Alberta churches. Carl’s son, John, founded the Church of Christ Development Company, which today is the leading source of funding for churches doing building construction across all three streams of the movement in Canada. And the majority of the churches that exist today in British Columbia are the result of the work of Don and Carolyn Albert, graduates of Minnesota Bible College, who came to Canada in 1958.

1. Reuben Butchart, *The Disciples of Christ in Canada since 1830* (Toronto: Canadian Headquarters’ Publications, Churches of Christ [Disciples], 1949), 284.

2. Geoffrey H. Ellis citing Griffin-Allwood, “An Inquiry into the Growth of the Disciples of Christ in 19th Century Ontario” (unpublished M.T.S. thesis, Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, 1993), 53.



Eventually the Great Division extended through the West. However, the vast expanse of the sparsely inhabited Prairies, where neighbors are truly appreciated, leads to a congenial disposition where the entrenched “divides” are less intrusive today than in the East. After all, the license plates of Manitoba read, “Friendly Manitoba.” There is greater cooperation among the various children of the movement, a more tolerant attitude which, by the way, one also finds on P.E.I. This spirit of cooperation manifested itself in the establishment of the Western Canadian Christian Convention, an annual gathering of people from all three streams, during the 1980s and 1990s. And in 1996, all three groups came together to host the World Convention of Churches of Christ in Calgary.

#### **“BRANCH PLANTS,” BRANCH DIVISIONS, VALUED FRIENDSHIPS LOOKING SOUTH**

When I was a child, because of the trade laws at the time—no “Free Trade,”—American companies set up branch plants to manufacture and sell goods in Canada. It may be unfair to characterize the connections between Canadian Campbell-Stone churches and their American counterparts in the same way. What became the Campbell-Stone movement in Canada was indigenous, or, more accurately, a church planting of the Haldane movement, (i.e, Scottish and English in origin). This was overlaid with the theological perspectives of another pioneer, primitivistic movement that emerged as the Stone-Campbell Movement in the United States, where it is regarded as a “home grown” tradition. It does not sit well with Canadians to be viewed as “Americans,” though we are the best of friends on many levels.

In the nineteenth century, bright students were already off to study at Bethany, Nashville, Lexington. The best and the brightest American preachers came to Canada (Franklin, Errett, Campbell) and some of them stayed. Various attempts were made to develop schools here to resolve the issue of training ministers (West Gore, Sinclair College, Alberta Bible College) and those efforts continue, but the entire tradition counts less than 15,000 adherents coast to coast. The sheer size of our country is against smaller traditions with fewer resources. In such a situation there is always the temptation to look south for answers and help, financial and otherwise.

Many of the congregations across the country are sustained by old families, people who have been a part of the tradition for generations; family and religious identity tend to merge. Of course, this is true of church life generally in Canada: We have tended to be stable, a member of such and such a church, even if we do not attend or are inactive.

The diminishment of rural life has affected the Campbell-Stone churches, like others. Many have closed as members moved to larger centers. These churches have not done very well in the cities. Toronto, the largest city in Canada, had in the nineteenth century a mayor who was a Disciple. Today, in this city of about 3,000,000, the Campbell-Stone churches together number only a handful, certainly less than two handfuls! There are some pockets of optimistic growth, such as the Independent congregation, Churchill Meadows Christian Church, that started with a massive phone survey inviting people to the start of a new church.

#### **ISSUES OF TOGETHERNESS (“FELLOWSHIP”), BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION, “CANADIAN-NESS”**

In 1981 I was in London, England. I wanted to visit an old British church, so I went to Hope Chapel, in Kentishtown, London. At the time they were about 110 years old, a small group in what seemed to be a massively immigrant neighborhood. I went home for lunch with one of the church leaders who explained to me that one of the big, divisive issues facing the congregation was where the announcements (“Notices”) were to go in the order of service—an order, by the way, that had not changed in years. I thought, “I know these people! This is familiar.” Was it British eccentricity? Is it an inherent, inbred predisposition towards divisiveness? How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?

After the Great Divide the *a cappella* churches in Canada tended to stay by themselves, looking toward the South, often the Deep South, where *a cappella* strength lay—Nashville, Abilene, Searcy. The Disciples looked south, but only perhaps as far as Chicago—because the North and Canada were primarily Disciples



after the Divide—but also to Nashville or Lexington. Then, after 1926, the Independents looked south, to Cincinnati, Johnson City, and so on. We tended not to travel together and eventually even forgot one another's names: we were attending different schools, reading different journals, going to different church camps. Strangers, except where individuals made the effort at the local level to get to know one another.

The *a cappella* churches have been a long time coming out of isolation, so there has been little attempt to be part of the theological marketplace, perhaps little desire to be there anyway. Reaching out to others on the road? Sometimes the answer would have been that there were no others on the road, not really, i.e., this type of sectarianism is almost entirely inward looking. Such sectarianism removes one from difficult and maybe not so difficult issues of interpretation, such as those occasioned by the changing role of women in our culture. An “outsider,” acquainted with a local Ontario Church of Christ and its attitudes towards women's participation, asked me if they were a cult. The great fear is, I think, if these things are subject to change, then the whole restorationist theological enterprise will come crashing down; there is no middle way, no way ahead. Of course, being stuck keeping the shop of the past leads to theological emptiness. Not helpful in this respect are the important ties to the Deep South, where attitudes toward women are not those of most Canadians.

In this and some other respects, the Disciples have done better, faithful to the other plank of Campbell's theology: the call to be one. It has been easier for them to talk with others, even to talk about church union with Baptists and major denominations, because they are not bound to a particular theological outlook, but are freer to move on. In fact, Disciples congregations in Calgary and Winnipeg are ecumenical congregations holding dual status with both the Disciples and the United Church of Canada. At the same time, they too are very weak numerically in Canada. The territory of uniting Christians was long ago taken over in this country by the United Church of Canada, a union of Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists in 1925—so explained the speaker at a meeting of the Grey County Historical Society twenty-five or so years ago. He was right at the time, but that territory now is increasingly occupied by the “community church movement,” often Pentecostal in orientation. The “name on the door” has ceased to be meaningful for many seekers in Canada. The middle road of the Campbell-Stone people in Canada is occupied by the Independents, theologically close to the *a cappella* people but somewhat more outgoing.

We all need the other to make the portrait of the Campbell-Stone call complete: to be one, to be faithful to the apostolic preaching. We should have learned by now that this does not and probably cannot mean that we will agree on everything and that respect for others in the tradition, with whom we share a journey, will bring its rewards.

The Campbell-Stone Movement is so numerically small in Canada that it has little impact on the movement's social context. I sometimes have said to friends in the Church of Christ, firmly wedded to tradition, that the differences between us and the United Church across the corner will not seem so great when the mosque is built nearby. In Canada, immigration from Scotland or even Europe is largely spent. The newcomers today come from much farther away. They too are bringing their religious traditions and, as a consequence, Canadian religious life will know more pluriformity than in the past. This may be most noticeable in Canada among the Disciples, who are rapidly changing from a rural white church to an urban multicultural church. As smaller established Disciples congregations, based primarily in rural areas, have closed in recent years, they have been replaced by new urban congregations reflecting the multicultural reality of Canadian society. A number of new congregations in Quebec, Ontario and Alberta have been formed in recent years among groups from Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin and South America. The growth among these churches is such that it could be argued that, among Canadian Disciples, those from our founding heritages are now the minority.

It behooves us to find ourselves in the genealogy of the Christian tradition, our larger family. For myself, I have tried to recover some of the balance that exists when one has heard not only the call to listen to the early gospel, but also the call to be one. For Christians in Canada that is increasingly not about the sign on

the door. Still, I am all right with Miss Babbington's clarification, because the Disciples church at Meaford was a rich place to grow up.

**CLAUDE COX** GREW UP IN THE HISTORIC DISCIPLES CHURCH/CHURCH OF CHRIST AT MEAFORD, ONTARIO, A CONGREGATION HIS GREAT-GREAT GRANDPARENTS JOINED "FROM THE BAPTISTS" IN 1850. HE IS CHAPLAIN AT GROVE PARK HOME FOR SENIOR CITIZENS IN BARRIE, ONTARIO, AND ADJUNCT PROFESSOR OF OLD TESTAMENT AND HEBREW AT MCMASTER DIVINITY COLLEGE, IN HAMILTON. HE WAS MINISTER OF THE LOCAL CHURCH OF CHRIST FOR SOME EIGHTEEN YEARS. HIS DOCTORATE IS IN SEPTUAGINT STUDIES FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO, BUT HE COUNTS AMONG EARLIER TREASURED TEACHERS EVERETT FERGUSON AND TOM OLBRICHT, AND FOR RESTORATION HISTORY, BILL HUMBLE. CLAUDE'S WIFE, ELAINE, IS A NURSE; TOGETHER THEY HAVE THREE TEENAGED CHILDREN.

**STAN LITKE** IS A MEMBER OF THE DISCIPLES OF CHRIST IN CANADA AND HAS SERVED THAT CHURCH IN VARIOUS CAPACITIES THROUGH THE YEARS, INCLUDING IN THE ROLE OF MODERATOR AND ECUMENICAL REPRESENTATIVE TO THE EIGHTH ASSEMBLY OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN HARARE, ZIMBABWE, IN 1998.



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