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Henry E. Webb

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Ecclesiology in the Restoration Movement

HENRY E. WEBB

"Ecclesiology," the theological term for the doctrine of the church, is a term not much in use in the Stone-Campbell Movement. The subject itself is one of great interest, and much has been written about it in the journals of the Movement. The paucity of examples of the term is probably due to the fact that ever since Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address* (published in 1809), in which he deplored the fact that creeds and theological systems had taken precedence over scripture in the thinking of Christian leaders, classical theology is not a prominent feature in the writings of the early leaders of the Movement.[1] Seminal treatment of the church is found in Alexander Campbell's *Christian System*[2] and in Robert Milligan's *Scheme of Redemption,*[3] which "came as near to being a definitive theology of Disciples of Christ as any book that was ever written."[4]

The *Declaration and Address* issued a call for reform-minded persons to establish societies dedicated to reformation of the church by bringing it into closer conformity to the New Testament. A reformed church would win approval from all Christians and would serve as the basis of the unity for which Christ prayed in John 17. It is not surprising, however, that denominations did not look with favor on "societies" whose intent was the elimination of denominations. Only one such "society" was organized—in Washington, PA. It eschewed any intention of becoming a "church."[5] On May 4, 1811, those who supported the efforts embodied in the *Declaration and Address* transformed their Association into the Brush Run Church.

This was a significant event that pre-determined several very important "ecclesiological" positions. For one, it effectively demonstrated that a local church could function as an independent, congregationally governed body. No outside ecclesiastical authority was petitioned to grant permission or give blessing to this local effort. The concept of independent congregational authority was not new in Protestantism. Its roots go back to sixteenth century Anabaptist practice and are seen in the writings of Oliver Cromwell, in British Congregationalism and in the Haldane Movement in Scotland. In each of the above, this understanding met with stiff opposition from advocates of a state church, but it was totally congenial to religious freedom in the New World.[6] And the authority to ordain candidates for ministry was also understood to rest with the congregation, as was demonstrated on January 1, 1812, when the Brush Run Church ordained Alexander Campbell to its ministry. A week later the church began the practice of weekly communion.

1. A case in point is seen in the original charter of Bethany College, which includes a prohibition of the teaching of theology. However, literature of a doctrinal nature abounds, but no work that could be considered to be formal, systematic theology. cf. W.E. Garrison and A.T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ: A History* (St. Louis, MO: Christian Board of Publication, 1948), 536-539.
2. Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing Co., 1910).
3. Robert Milligan, *The Scheme of Redemption* (Cincinnati, OH: Central Book Concern, 1880).
4. A.S. Hayden cited by Garrison and DeGroot, 537.
5. Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, Item IV of the "Declaration." See C. A. Young, *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Unit* (Joplin, MO: College Press, reprint 1985), 75.
6. Garrison and DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ: A History*, 156. W. E. Garrison observed: "In constituting themselves a church without the sanction of any bishop, presbytery, or a presiding elder, they committed themselves to the principle of the autonomy of the local congregation."

The implications in the *Declaration and Address* were not long in working change in the thinking of the Campbells, and by June of 1812 the Campbell family, Thomas, Alexander, their wives, and other family members, were immersed. Most of the others in the Brush Run Church followed. Those who did not share in this understanding of baptism dropped out. But this view of baptism would be reinforced by several debates into which Alexander Campbell entered and by which his name was projected into many communities in the wider area.

The concept of church became a topic of much discussion in the nascent Movement to reform Christian practice. Reform congregations seeking to exemplify the faith and practice of early Christianity were organized in many surrounding communities, and similarities to the Baptist were noted (especially immersion of believers). Having no desire to become another isolated sect and in keeping with their plea for unity, the Brush Run Church accepted an invitation to join with the Redstone Association of Baptists of the area, a sojourn that would last for ten years (1813-1823), when the Brush Run Church transferred to the Mahoning Association. The Baptist relationship was severed in 1829. The Reforming Baptist Churches—this was the name given to the Baptists of the Mahoning Association (largely in Ohio), which agreed with the reforms that Alexander Campbell was advocating—became simply Churches of Christ and the members were "disciples of Christ." Thus the Movement was "non-denominational" in the sense that it had no affiliation with any existing denomination.[7]

In August of 1830 in Austintown, OH, the Mahoning Baptist Association dissolved. This act launched an independent religious body and left many questions to be resolved pertaining to the nature of the new fellowship of churches. Was it to be one of radical independency? Was there to be any inter-congregational relationship? If so, what was the nature and authority (if any) of this relationship? Is "church" a concept limited to a local congregation of believers or does it have meaning beyond this? These, and related questions, would be subjects of much discussion during the decades which followed, and they lurk behind many of the later issues faced by the Movement.

The first of the above questions was answered in the very meeting that dissolved the Mahoning Baptist Association: The body determined to meet annually, but only for preaching and mutual edification,[8] a fundamental concept that would survive in much of the Movement to the present day. But this did not satisfy the thinking of Alexander Campbell, who wrote extensively on the nature and organization of the church in *The Millennial Harbinger,* which he began to publish the very year of separation from the Baptists. In November of 1841 he began a series of sixteen articles on "The Nature of the Christian Organization."

Alexander Campbell was not comfortable with the implications of congregational independency that were evident in the dissolution of the Mahoning Association in 1830. In his student days at the University of Glasgow he had developed confidence in the Lockean idea of the "consensus fidelium" as an important safeguard against the idiosyncrasies of individual interpretation or individual congregational dogma. How this consensus is to be realized points up the fact that the doctrine of church involves certain tensions that are not easily resolved. William Robinson notes that the word "*ecclesia* appears one hundred and fifteen times in the New Testament. In seventy-nine references the term applies to local church(es). Twenty-seven times the reference is used of the church universal."[9] Advocates in our fellowship have never resorted to the concept of a nebulous "spiritual church" device to understand the texts where the church is considered to be supra-local. The problem is to understand how the larger church is manifest. Campbell struggled with

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7. I realize that this term is ambiguous and involves several connotations, some of which are nonsensical. With no desire to enter into a semantic discussion, I use it here simply to mean that this step in 1830 severed these churches from any affiliation with an existing denomination.

8. A.S. Hayden,, *Early History of the Disciples on the Western Reserve* (New York: Arno Press, 1970).

9. William Robinson, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church* (St. Louis, MO: Bethany Press, 1948), 107. Like Campbell, Robinson, an Englishman who taught at the University of Birmingham, did not share the American cultural heritage of individualism. Nor is it found in the British Churches of Christ, whose propensity for extra-congregational organization is also found in the churches of this fellowship in Australia and New Zealand, quite to the surprise of some Americans.

this tension throughout his life; it was never resolved for him. In 1848 Campbell visited the British churches and found no fault with their Conference. He returned to the United States at the time that an effort was being made to organize a national body to send out the first foreign missionary from the Movement. Unable to attend because of illness, he was elected the first President. He had hoped that the organization would consist of "messengers" that would be commissioned by the churches. Instead, it was convened as a mass meeting that organized a "society" (a quasi-independent body existing for a single purpose). Societies were very popular and were employed by several Protestant bodies. Organized as single-purpose devices, they were not considered to be "church," although their purpose was to do an important work of the church. On October 23, 1849, 156 delegates from eleven states met in Cincinnati to address the churches' enthusiasm for missions (closely related to prevailing millennial enthusiasm). It was to be known as The American Christian Missionary Society (ACMS).[10] A constitution was written which predicated membership on payment of annual dues. Financial support languished during the Civil War, and the ACMS was vilified in the South for its Pro-North loyalty resolution in 1863.

Despite the slavery and war problems, the Movement expanded rapidly. Churches were forming annual meetings called "co-operations" to sustain evangelists. These co-operations evolved into county and then into state meetings, generally called "conventions" of the State Missionary Societies.[11] Earlier "unhappy experiences with synods, presbyteries and associations made the churches keenly suspicious of ecclesiastical despotism possibly lurking in such conventions,"[12] and thus they were continued as voluntary associations of individuals that in no way possessed any authority over congregations.

The decades following the Civil War saw a plethora of conflicts destroy the unity of the Stone-Campbell Movement, and they produced the first major schism, mostly along geographical lines. The pro-North Loyalty Resolution of 1863 had turned the southern churches against the ACMS and created a different mentality among churches in the South with respect to extra-congregational bodies. Separation of churches that rejected instrumental music (and several other "innovations" that were accepted in the North) was more of a process than an event. It was recognized in the Federal Census of 1906. Out of this separation came two divergent understandings of "church," to be described later.

The "Louisville Plan" was adopted in 1869 to rectify the failings of the ACMS. "Fearfully and wonderfully made,"[13] it was far in advance of the thinking of the Movement. It came under a barrage of criticism and floundered. Not to be denied their enthusiasm for missions, the women of the churches in the North organized the Christian Women's Board of Missions in 1874, thereby reverting to individual support of the mission effort through a society. The Foreign Christian Missionary Society was launched on the same principle the following year. Societies would be employed in later decades for other causes such as benevolence, church extension, and pensions for ministers. All of these concerns were deemed to be responsibilities of the larger Church, but fear of ecclesiasticism required that they be "agencies" funded by concerned individuals, albeit often through local churches[14] as a matter of efficiency. Conventions were annual meetings of the agencies. In time these bodies joined efforts to increase centralization of the agencies. A major step was taken when several were combined into the United Christian Missionary Society in 1917, with headquarters in Indianapolis, IN. This move renewed the fears of a developing ecclesiasticism.[15]

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10. See Grant K Lewis, *The American Christian Missionary Society* (St. Louis, MO: Christian Board of Publication, 1937).
11. Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples on the Western Reserve,* details this development.
12. Lewis, *The American Christian Missionary Society*, 3. Lewis holds that "this bias hindered beyond measure the progress of the movement."
13. The description is that of W.E. Garrison, Garrison and DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ: A History*, p. 354. He wryly added "The Disciples had no training for such an elaborate piece of ecclesiastical machinery, and it broke down under its own weight before it ever got started."
14. An examination of the yearbooks of the Disciples of Christ will reveal that most of the larger, urban congregations had Ladies Missionary Societies that supplied most of the funding.
15. Subsequently, the Pension Fund, Church Extension, and National Benevolent Association withdrew from this uniting effort.

organization that could impinge on the autonomy of individual churches. This independency, however, has not prevented them from cooperating on important efforts of mutual interest. They are committed to missionary activity, but this is done through the oversight of elders in a local congregation. Churches too small or too financially stretched to maintain their own mission work send support to the sponsoring church of the work in which they have an interest. They do not send funds directly to the missionary, insisting that missionaries, like ministers, must be under the supervision of elders of a church.

A third stream of the Movement became apparent as many congregations observed the developing ecclesiology of what was to become the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. These congregations affirmed their traditional congregationalism, which, like Churches of Christ, they would have traced back to the founding of the Movement. In this respect they were and are ecclesiologically similar to Churches of Christ, seeing the Church fully expressed in the local congregation. In fact the theological difference between these two groups is probably more a matter of hermeneutics than ecclesiology (e.g., are the "silences" of the Bible to be understood as permissive or prohibitory?) Because the Disciples of Christ spoke of their agencies as being "cooperative" efforts, Christian Churches/Churches of Christ were often called "independents," a designation that has tended to lose its historical significance. The conventions of this body, both national and regional, have no authority and undertake no activity except to plan for the convention of the following year

All three of the bodies have no difficulty finding biblical precedents for their ecclesiology. Nor are their proponents at a loss in finding confirmatory citations from early leaders of the Stone-Campbell Movement.

Henry E. Webb is professor emeritus of church history of Milligan College in Tennessee. He served as the guest editor of an issue of *Leaven* entitled "Restoration Themes" (Fall Quarter, 1999).