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The Future of the Restoration Movement: A Disciple of Christ's Response

D. NEWELL WILLIAMS

Leonard Allen's thoughtful reflections on the future of the Restoration Movement have reminded me, again, of the critical role of perspective in determining what one perceives. This recognition is all the more striking to me because of similarities in Dr. Allen's and my vocational histories. For more than twenty-five years I, too, was immersed in the task of understanding the theological heritage of the Stone-Campbell Movement and, in particular, the stream in which I was reared, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Also, similar to Dr. Allen, I have since sought through writing and teaching to help both insiders and outsiders better understand the theological tradition of the branch of the Stone-Campbell Movement from which I hail. But this is where many similarities end. What I have found in the theological heritage of the Stone-Campbell Movement and have sought to communicate differs in significant ways from Dr. Allen's writings and teachings. This should not be surprising. As Dr. Allen notes, the three major heirs of this nineteenth-century unity Movement now have close to a century or more of separate histories. As a result, students from different segments of the Movement begin their investigations of the Stone-Campbell heritage from different perspectives. Thus, I have chosen to begin this response to Dr. Allen's essay with a candid disclosure of my own perspective.

I began my study of the Stone-Campbell theological tradition as a Master of Divinity student at Vanderbilt Divinity School. In contrast to Dr. Allen, I did not begin this study because of "nagging curiosities and troubling doubts about my early indoctrination." On the contrary, I was very comfortable with my identity as a life-long participant in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Moreover, as I began my study of the Stone-Campbell theological tradition, I was simultaneously engaged in exploring the larger history of the church. As I came to discover and appreciate what Dr. Allen identifies as the "Great Tradition of the faith" regarding baptism and the Lord's Supper, especially as expressed in the theologies of the sixteenth-century reformers, Luther and Calvin, I saw striking similarities to the tradition of Campbell and Stone. In particular, I recognized that for both Luther and Campbell, baptism and the Lord's Supper were of utmost importance to the spiritual life of the believer. Little wonder, I thought, that Alexander Campbell begins "Remission of Sins," his most important essay on the purpose of baptism, with a laudatory reference to Luther's assertion that faithfulness to the teaching of justification by grace is the test of the rising and falling of the church. In other words, as a Disciple, I never had to overcome the notion that my church had "escaped tradition," that it somehow stood outside of history, disconnected from everything that had happened since the close of the apostolic age. As Dr. Allen would anticipate from his careful study of the Disciples, such a non-historical view of the Movement was not part of my early indoctrination.

As I was beginning my study of the Stone-Campbell theological tradition, I did experience "disorientation" and a "sharp personal struggle." This crisis, however, was not a result of my discoveries of the Stone-Campbell tradition. Rather, it was through study of the Stone-Campbell tradition that my disorientation and personal struggle were resolved! To make a long story short, I became convinced, through a course on Paul, that all of the earliest Christians could personally testify to immediate and extraordinary experiences

of the Holy Spirit. Since I could not personally testify to such an experience, I came to the conclusion that I was not a real Christian. This conclusion was deeply disorienting. I had planned to be a pastor. If I were not a real Christian, how could I guide others to relationship with Jesus Christ? I struggled with whether I should withdraw from the Divinity School and transfer to some other academic program. But, more than that, I struggled with the purposes of God and the meaning of my own life. At the same time, I was reading the autobiography of Barton W. Stone. I discovered that Stone, too, struggled with not having experienced an extraordinary work of the Spirit that would mark him as a Christian. At length, I accepted Stone's spiritual resolution for myself. Following Stone, I affirmed that the love for God that I *had* experienced in response to the word of God's love for sinners was the work of the Spirit. This affirmation resolved the deep struggles of my soul and allowed me to reclaim my membership in the body of Christ and my vocation as a minister of the gospel.

As I have worked with hundreds of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) seminary students, my goal has not been so much to ease them or jolt them into "thinking critically about their modern [i.e. Enlightenment] heritage," but to introduce them to the richness of the Stone-Campbell theological tradition—especially as regards the work of the Holy Spirit through preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. The common descriptor that the followers of Stone and Campbell were a distinctively American movement that embraced the individualism and populism of nineteenth century has seemed woefully inadequate. To be sure, the Movement was an adaptation of Christianity to democratic culture. But, more than that, it countered the social fragmentation fueled by the democratic culture of the era by pioneering a way of unity in diversity based on the simple confession that Jesus is the Christ. Moreover, the heart and soul of the Movement, its understanding of God's gracious will for humanity, was rooted in historic Christianity, especially as it had been interpreted by the great reformers of the sixteenth century.

In short, my particular Disciples perspective has caused me to see continuity with the Great Tradition of the faith and a personally helpful doctrine of the Spirit in the Stone-Campbell theological tradition. Consequently, I have a different view of where the Stone-Campbell tradition stands in relation to the three challenges that Dr. Allen identifies as shaping our future.

First, the new spiritual openness. After noting the postmodern yearning for the spiritual, Dr. Allen asks, "How effectively can the modernist heirs of Alexander Campbell respond to this spiritual hunger?" He answers, "With our Campbellite reflexes we will, no doubt, continue to react against trendy, fashionable—and often heretical—spiritualities of the time, the running after spiritual experiences, the charismatic hype and excesses portrayed in the media." But then he adds, "...our own theological traditions, which have tended to be reactionary rather than constructive, ill-equip us for the recovery of a robust and balanced spirituality."

From my particular Disciples perspective, I cannot help but note that Dr. Allen does not ask how effectively can the heirs of *Barton Stone* respond to the spiritual hunger of the postmoderns? While Alexander Campbell was skeptical of the physical "exercises" associated with the Great Revival in the West, Stone always defended the falling, dancing, jerking, and singing from the breast associated with the Revival, which he portrayed as the beginning of God's formation of the Christian Church movement in the West. While denying that such exercises are essential to the life of the church, Stone argued that God had used these exercises to draw attention to the gospel in the early years of the nineteenth century. Stone acknowledged that he had seen much that he considered to be "fanaticism," but answered critics, who saw the exercises as works of the devil, by asserting, "But that cannot be a Satanic work, which brings men to humble confession and forsaking of sin—to solemn prayer—fervent praise and thanksgiving, and to sincere and

affectionate exhortations to sinners to repent and go to Jesus the Saviour."¹ While Stone would not identify any particular spiritual manifestation as essential to the Christian, he wrote in 1833 regarding the internal witness of the Spirit, "Exclude love, joy, peace, etc. as evidences of our acceptance, and salvation, and there is nothing in religion desirable." Three years later, in what he thought might be his last published statement, Stone warned, "Let none vainly hope for Heaven, who know not its joys in part on earth—who has not the witnessing Spirit, testifying with his spirit that he is a son of God."² And as I have argued else-

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where, Alexander Campbell, for all of his skepticism regarding popular nineteenth-century expressions of religion, was in full agreement with Stone in the critically important matter of Christian experience of love, joy, and peace.³

To be sure, "the shadow of rationalism has lingered long—and lingers still," in all three streams of

the Stone-Campbell Movement. Nevertheless, there are, indeed, resources in our Stone-Campbell heritage for the recovery of a robust and balanced spirituality—one that does not deny either heart or mind.

Second, Dr. Allen identifies the failure of the original unity vision as challenging the future of the Movement. He states, "Campbell and other early nineteenth-century restorationists hoped to bring about a rational consensus in place of a badly fractured Christian tradition." He adds, "The theological tradition that shaped us required a rational consensus; and it carried the deep assumption that every honest, rational individual could—and would—read the Bible alike." Dr. Allen declares that the Movement's hope of achieving a rational doctrinal consensus has failed and that it was bound to do so, given the erroneous Enlightenment epistemological assumptions on which it was based.

There is no denying that hope for rational consensus has deeply influenced the history of the Stone-Campbell Movement. There is plenty of evidence that Campbell believed that a rational consensus could be achieved with regard to the practices of the ancient church. At the same time, he explicitly rejected the possibility of a rational consensus on matters of doctrine. In the *Christian Baptist*, Campbell argued that the ancient faith was not the metaphysical dogmas of the creeds, but the gospel or good news of what God had *done* through Jesus Christ, as testified by the apostles. To be a Christian, Campbell asserted, was to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, upon the testimony of the apostles, and to be baptized, in accord with apostolic practice, into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. He declared that confession that Jesus was the Christ, followed by baptism, was *all* that was necessary for the union of Christians.⁴ Moreover, he maintained that all attempts to found the unity of the church upon the adoption of a "human" creed were "incompatible with the nature and circumstances of mankind." "Human creeds," he argued, "are composed of the inferences of the human understanding speculating upon the revelation of God." Inferences drawn by human understanding, he asserted, partake of all the "defects" of human understanding. For this reason, he noted, we "often observe two men sincerely exercising their mental powers, upon the same words of inspiration, drawing inferences or conclusions, not only diverse but flatly contradictory." This, he suggested, was the result of many factors: "the prejudices of education, habits of thinking, modes of reasoning, different degrees of information, the influences of a variety of passions and interests, and above all, the different degrees of strength of human intellect." He asserted, "The persons themselves are very often

1. Barton W. Stone, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone, Written by Himself, with Additions and Reflections by Eld. John Rogers* (Cincinnati: Published for the author by J.S. and U.P. James, 1847); reprinted in *The Cane Ridge Reader*, ed. Hoke S. Dickson (n.p.: 1972), 35-38.

2. *Christian Messenger* 7 (July 1833): 202-203; 10 (December 1836): 186-189.

3. D. Newell Williams, "The Gospel as the Power of God to Salvation: Alexander Campbell and Experimental Religion," in *Lectures in Honor of the Alexander Campbell Bicentennial, 1788-1988* (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1988), 127-148.

4. *Christian Baptist* 1 (April 1824): 220-23; 3 (April 1826): 204-5; 3 (May 1826): 225-31; 4 (September 1826): 34-37.

unconscious of the operation of all these circumstances, and are, therefore, honestly and sincerely zealous in believing and in maintaining the truth of their respective conclusions.”⁵ Given Campbell’s clearly stated reservations regarding the ability of human beings to achieve rational consensus regarding matters of doctrine, it is not surprising that the major divisions in our Movement have focused more on differences in practice than differences in theology.

From my particular Disciples perspective, I would also urge that we not overlook that for Barton Stone, rational consensus regarding practice was no more to be expected than rational consensus regarding doctrine. In contrast to an Enlightenment epistemology based on the assumptions that context, tradition, and community do not matter, Stone argued that context, community and tradition play a *significant* role in our perception of truth regarding practice and doctrine. In his *Christian Baptist* days, Campbell, like other Baptists, made believers’ immersion a qualification for participation in the Lord’s Supper. Stone’s position on the qualifications for communion was developed in a three-part series that appeared in the *Christian Messenger* in the fall of 1828.⁶ The author of the series was “Timothy,” who from the content and style of the essays appears to have been Stone himself. Timothy stated that pious infant baptizers, whom he referred to as “Paidobaptists,” differed from pious Baptists only in their interpretation of what constituted baptism. He argued that “the general devotion of the Paidobaptist to the cause of Christ fully evinces that if he errs in this case, it is an error of the judgment, and not of the will.” Since all Christians were guilty of errors of judgment, who, Timothy asked, would “cast the first stone at the Paidobaptists?” Timothy further argued that both scripture and the “reason and fitness of things” taught “that God requires more or less of his creatures, in exact proportion to their capacities and circumstances.” He continued that when it is considered that the word “baptize” is not translated in the King James version of the Bible, “that many learned divines of different ages, have made learned, labored, and ingenious defenses of infant baptism; [and] that many thousands to the present day, are taught this doctrine from their cradles,” it was no “marvel” that many were convinced Paidobaptists! Timothy further stated that one must recognize that “our circumstances are vastly different from those of primitive Christians” who, he suggested, were not presented, as were modern Christians, with a confusing variety of baptismal practices. Timothy knew, of course, that Baptists claimed to exclude Paidobaptists from communion in order to impress upon them the “truth” that believers’ immersion alone was baptism. He declared that their action was “perfectly adapted to defeat their own avowed object.” By excluding pious Paidobaptists from their communion, they lost access to them and confirmed them in their error. By receiving pious Paidobaptists at the Lord’s Table, he advised, they would pave the way to their “conversion to the truth.”⁷ This, of course, had been the experience of Stone’s Christians, who, as Stone related in his *History of the Christian Church in the West*, had refused to make immersion a term of communion and had gone from being a Paidobaptist church to being a church in which there was not “one in 500” who had not been immersed.⁸

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Stone’s most famous discourse on unity is his comparison of four types of union, in which he rejects all forms of rational consensus as producing unity. *Book* union was founded on a creed or confession of faith. *Head* union was the same as book union, except that the articles of the confession were not written in a book. *Water* union was founded on immersion into water. *Fire* union was “the unity of the spirit.” And, it

5. *Christian Baptist* 2 (March 1825): 179-180.

6. The series was entitled, “The Communion of Christians at the Lord’s Table.”

7. *Christian Messenger* 3 (December 1828): 34-37.

8. Barton W. Stone, *History of the Christian Church in the West* (Lexington, KY: College of the Bible, 1956), 47.

was fire or spirit union, he argued, that alone would “stand,” as no other union was “worth the name.” “This spirit,” he observed, was “obtained through faith, not in a human form or set of opinions, whether written or not written, but in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners; and by a cheerful obedience to all his known commands.” “This spirit,” he continued, “leads us to love God and his children—to love and pray for all mankind.” He stated that it was fire union “for which Jesus prayed, and by which the world will believe that he is the Christ of God.” Employing another image, he observed, “how vain are all human attempts to unite a bundle of twigs together, so as to make them grow together, and bear fruit!” To grow together, he continued, twigs “must first be united with the living stock, and receive its sap, and spirit, before they can ever be united with each other.” “So,” he asserted, “must we be first united with Christ, and receive his spirit, before we can ever be in spirit united with one another.” “Men,” he concluded, “have devised many plans to unite Christians—all are vain.” “There is,” he admonished, “but one effectual plan, which is, that all be united with Christ, and walk in him.”⁹

Dr. Allen states that facing up to the failure of the hope for Christian unity based on doctrinal consensus will require a fundamental reorientation for many in Churches of Christ and in Christian Churches, but that there are resources for such reorientation within the tradition itself. He further states that the Disciples of Christ’s brand of “formal ecumenism” has fallen on hard times. I suggest to Christians in all streams of the Movement that Barton Stone’s view that Christian unity is not a human work, but a work of God’s Spirit received through faith in Jesus Christ, is a resource that can help us to more fully live into our vocation as a Christian unity movement.

Third, Dr. Allen states that the new awareness of tradition and the role of creeds challenge the future of the Restoration Movement. He asserts that to work at theological reorientation within a tradition, one must “first be conscious of having or being a tradition.” Disciples took this step in the twentieth century. He reports that it has been difficult for people in Churches of Christ and Christian Churches to take this step because “their very powerful and ever-present tradition had taught them that they were just New Testament Christians, not part of any human, and hence denominational, tradition.” He also observes that while people from Churches of Christ and Christian Churches who have taken this step have “found the new vista wonderfully freeing and spiritually uplifting,” it has left them with the dilemma of “what to do with their anti-tradition tradition.”

From my particular Disciples perspective, I must first observe that to read the historic Stone-Campbell *anti-creedal* position as *anti-tradition* is to miss the fact that Alexander Campbell supported his views of baptism and the Lord’s Supper (or, as he preferred to call it, “Breaking the Loaf”) from scripture, reason, experience, and tradition. For confirmation of Campbell’s use of what is sometimes called the Methodist Quadrilateral, one need merely review “Remission of Sins” and “Breaking the Loaf,” which Campbell included in his *The Christian System*, first published in 1835. In “Remission of Sins,” Campbell declares in Proposition XI, “All the apostolical Fathers, as they are called; all the pupils of the Apostles; and all the ecclesiastical writers of note, of the first four Christian centuries, whose writings have come down to us; allude to, and speak of, Christian immersion, as the ‘regeneration’ and ‘remission of sins’ spoken of in the New Testament.”¹⁰ In support of this proposition, he prints excerpts from Barnabas, Clement, Hermas, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian. He also argues in Proposition XII, “But even the reformed creeds, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist, substantially avow the same view of immersion, though apparently afraid to carry them out in faith and practice,” which he supports with extracts from the creeds of each of the named bodies. In addition, he includes excerpts from Lutheran confessions, quotations from Calvin and Wesley, and notes that the Roman Catholic and Greek churches also affirm “one baptism

9. *Christian Messenger* 7 (October 1833): 314-316.

10. Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (Cincinnati: Published by H.S. Bosworth, 1866), 218.

for the remission of sins.”¹¹ In “Breaking the Loaf,” Campbell makes the argument from tradition under his seventh proposition.¹² Dr. Allen urges that our task is not “a vain avoidance of tradition,” but to “identify ourselves with what is called the Great Tradition—historic orthodoxy marked out by the ecumenical creeds of the early church and the Reformation era.” While not denying the significant differences in modern and postmodern views of tradition, I would suggest that the Movement has an example of identifying ourselves with the Great Tradition of the church in the work of no less a restorationist than Alexander Campbell.

If the Stone-Campbell anti-creedal tradition is not to be read as anti-tradition—at least, not as practiced by Alexander Campbell, then what is to be done with it? I suggest that it be read as anti-sectarian. While not denying the positive uses of tradition, it opposes the use of any test of fellowship not found in the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ. This, I believe, is the fundamental argument of Thomas Campbell’s *Declaration and Address*, recognized as a founding document in all three streams of the Movement.¹³

The postmodern era challenges all churches, including the Disciples of Christ. But, having long ago rejected, and in some cases, never accepted, the untempered Enlightenment assumptions identified by Dr. Allen, Disciples do not face the three challenges that Dr. Allen has highlighted, at least not to the same extent as Churches of Christ and Christian Churches. Close to a century or more of separate histories has made a difference. For Disciples, the major challenge is a loss of nerve in response to numerical decline that began in the 1960s. For me, the Stone-Campbell theological heritage is not so much a source of challenges, but a rich array of resources for witnessing to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the postmodern era. Therefore, I find myself in total agreement with the final sections of Dr. Allen’s paper. With him, I rue the prospect of a future for any stream of the Restoration Movement that would be devoid of the richest contributions of this Movement. With him, I include in that category the high views of baptism and the Lord’s Supper that the Movement embraced in its earliest years. This is no time for any stream of the Movement to down play these formative and empowering channels of divine life and grace. And, in keeping with what I hear in the tenor of Dr. Allen’s final paragraphs, I would add to the category of the Movement’s richest contributions, the founders’ commitment to the vocation of Christian unity. The unity that Stone and Campbell sought was not alliances or partnerships with those of like doctrine, but unity in Christ, a new humanity that will cause the world to believe that the Father sent the Son. May we, the heirs of Stone and Campbell, free ourselves from philosophical assumptions, unexamined theological premises, and the loss of nerve that would keep us from fulfilling our distinctive calling as the Restoration Movement.

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11. Campbell, 225-230.

12. Campbell, 311-327.

13. Thomas H. Olbricht and Hans Rollmann, eds., *The Quest for Christian Unity, Peace, and Purity in Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address: Text and Studies* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000).