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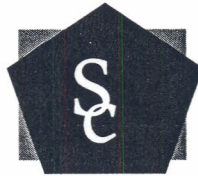
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The American Frontier



By W. Dennis Helsabeck Jr.

With the ingenuity and skill of a seacoast native riding a surfboard, they steered their vehicle of "simple New Testament Christianity" amid the turbulence and the tidal power of the great wave of west-ward population.¹

The imagery of the Stone-Campbell movement as a surfboard driven by the societal forces of the frontier's wave is, at least among the scholars of the movement, a veritable article of faith. The premise of this issue of *Leaven* is that we need to recognize how we have interacted with the cultural milieu; it is quite possible that in recognizing the impact of the frontier, we first began to accept this cultural reality.

This interpretive theme began, quite apart from the history of the Disciples, in the mind of the young Wisconsin scholar Frederick Jackson Turner. Reading a paper in 1893 at the Chicago World's Fair, he made his reputation (and that of his department at the University of Wisconsin, as well) with his notion that it was the existence of the frontier, not the constitutional documents or their antecedents, that had shaped American democratic life and character.² Free land, westward expansion, and the continual process of beginning again (out on the line of settlement) explain American national development. From this frontier, then, came our independence of character, our zeal for democratic institutions, our disdain for aristocracies of birth or position, and our desire for the elimination of nonessentials from government (or any other social organization).

Around his ideas Turner's disciples developed a whole school of historical interpretation that has become deeply imbedded in the way Americans understand themselves. Turner himself was modest and somewhat tentative about his thesis,³ but his ideas of the frontier began (and continue) to influence even church historians. As a young scholar from central Wisconsin with degrees from the university in Madison and a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins, Turner could not have predicted that he would influence the historiography of the followers of Barton Stone and the Campbells.

That Turner did have such influence can be seen in the important work of Winfred Ernest Garrison, *Religion Follows the Frontier* (1931). The son of an admired Disciples editor (J. H. Garrison) and himself professor at the University of Chicago, Garrison is still celebrated as one of the finest historians produced by our movement.

The Turner/Garrison Thesis

From Garrison's time on, the scholars of the movement, if not the folks in its pews, have accepted his notion that we are deeply influenced by the frontier: its independence, its love of simplicity accompanied by the elimination of nonessentials, its despising of hierarchy, and its love of freedom from structural oppression. As Garrison himself observes:

the significance of this body lies in the fact that it is a typical case of a group originating on the

frontier, embodying in its first period the intellectual and cultural characteristics of the frontier, and gradually undergoing modifications . . . with the passing of the frontier stage. . . .⁴

The Turner/Garrison thesis, understanding our history in the light of a frontier setting, may now be found as an understood assumption in the histories of all three segments of the Stone-Campbell movement.⁵ The very brevity of these references would seem to suggest that a frontier thesis is accepted; no long discussion is needed in its defense. It is not uncommon in the late twentieth century to hear ourselves described as a movement arising out of the American frontier.

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An irony may lie in this now accepted assumption that we are in some sense a product of the frontier milieu. The younger generation of leaders in all of the segments of the tradition has now been raised to believe it. Accepting it as a given truth, our younger leaders are a product of this notion as much as people on the frontier were products of that frontier. This mindset may well have an impact on how the movement is understood in our day (for if, after all, the movement is a product of the frontier, can it have any relevance for the twenty-first century—when we no longer live on the frontier?).

It is interesting to note that just as Garrison was bringing the frontier thesis to bear on our history (and to become an accepted way to understand it)—his book was published in 1931—the inevitable revisionists of Turner’s thesis began to be heard. In the 1930s and 1940s, historians like Benjamin Wright of Harvard and Louis Hacker of Columbia questioned Turner’s ideas (of democratization, for example). While this revisionism moderated in the 1950s, it is fair to say that for subsequent American historians, the Turner thesis may either be “dead as a dodo” or it may stand, albeit with

modifications. These developments among our nation’s historians should, at the very least, make us humble about whatever assumptions and assertions we have about the influence of the frontier on our own history.

Such caution about this thesis may arise from the basic questions of *what, where, and when* was this “frontier”? Turner’s 1893 address was occasioned by the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, looking forward to a new century; his thesis responded to the announcement of the U.S. Census in 1890 that it would no longer cite “frontier of settlement” as a category.

Neither space nor purpose allow for an in-depth analysis here of these questions about defining “frontier” (one source suggests that a frontier existed where there were no more than two persons per square mile⁶). The questions are nonetheless troubling if we are to invoke the frontier as a formative factor in our history. At the beginning of the Federal period (1789), much of America (certainly, west of the Appalachians) was frontier. But when did it cease to be frontier? To use but one example, the entire Northwest Territory had only 51,000 people in 1800; by 1820, however, Ohio alone had a population of 230,760, and by 1830 the number was over 937,000 (fourth among the twenty-four states).⁷ In the same year, Kentucky boasted a population of over 688,000. Some writers caution against drawing too sharp a distinction between the East and the frontier: “the frontier rapidly receded and the new settlements quickly assumed the characteristics of the areas from which the settlers had come.”⁸ None of this is intended to negate the influence of the frontier on the early days of the movement, but it does suggest to us that we not put more stock in this thesis than it may warrant.

The Immediate Impact

Despite these cautions about definition, timing, and geography, there is a case to be made that the frontier, however and wherever defined, did in fact have a formative influence on the Stone-Campbell tradition. We recognize ourselves in Turner’s descriptions of disdain for aristocracy, democratic impulses, and independence (with regard to “clergy,” for example). The elimination of nonessentials likewise sounds familiar. Simplicity and direct action are virtues. A delightful and valuable account of these themes is woven into Jerry Rushford’s new study (1997) of the Restoration movement in Or-

egon (from his first sentence onward, we are reminded of our origin “on the American frontier”).⁹

Perhaps the greatest influence of the frontier can be seen in the movement’s growth. The characteristics of the frontier and the messages of the movement had an affinity that can be seen in the places we prospered in the first half of the nineteenth century: Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, and on to the end of the Oregon Trail.

A more difficult question is whether the theology of the new movement was influenced by the frontier. To the degree that Thomas Campbell’s *Declaration and Address* was a formative document for our people, it is difficult to ascribe our theology to the frontier. Forty-four years old when he came to America and forty-six when he wrote, his understandings were largely shaped (in a remarkable combination of ways) by his life in Ireland and Scotland (G. Richard Phillips’ dissertation is a valuable study of this topic).¹⁰ To the degree that his son Alexander was influenced by Thomas (as Alexander asserts in his 1861 biography of Thomas) and by the same forces in the British Isles that influenced his father (certain features of the Enlightenment and romanticism), it is unlikely that we will find frontier influences on his theology. Phillips notes that, unlike Stone’s movement, the Campbells’ can be called a frontier movement in only two senses: in its romantic primitivism (which gives rise to his plea for a “restoration of primitive Christianity”) and in the fact that its area of strength and growth was close to the frontier (an unstructured religious life in an area that was “culturally indeterminate,” rather than a “frontier” psychology). In fact, the Campbell movement did not so much move west with the frontier as keep its strength in the areas where Campbell gave it his strong leadership.¹¹ The Campbells, then, seem to offer a theology, not born of the frontier, but attractive to it.

The Stone movement, on the other hand, was more susceptible to its American frontier setting. Stone was influenced by a form of Presbyterianism that is identified with the move westward into Kentucky and Tennessee (even though it encountered a conservative reaction).¹² Add Lockean ideas of the social contract (where the individual is supreme) to the setting of the frontier, and one can see the theme of liberty so strongly a part of the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield*

Presbytery.¹³ The freedom of the frontier, combined in the early nineteenth century with a growing Arminian theology (a role for free will), found a place in the Stone movement as well.

The Lingering Impact

W. E. Garrison begins his book by raising two questions. The first asks what ideas and forces were at work to initiate the Stone-Campbell movement in a previous century. But then, and for our consideration here, what happens to such a group when, having taken form on the frontier, it now finds itself in a new century with significantly different social and economic forces at

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work?¹⁴ Garrison’s second question may be more difficult to answer than we would wish.

It is difficult precisely because the frontier was not the *only* formative influence on our life as a movement.¹⁵ Besides the questions surrounding the nature of the frontier (when, where, and what it was), there is the reality of influences carried to America by the Campbells. These include Thomas’ family (vestiges of Anglican influence), his experiences with a divided Presbyterianism, the influences of Rich Hill and the Evangelical Society of Ulster, not to speak of his education at the University of Glasgow, and perhaps more. There is the impact of Walter Scott’s heritage—the list of influences deriving from factors other than the frontier may not be a short one. The use of Garrison’s second question as a rationale for wholesale change in the twentieth century, therefore, should at the very least make us cautious. Influences *other* than the frontier may be less transitory, inviting us to *conserve* those elements still applicable to the postfrontier age. Perhaps we have been, in some cases, too facile in interpreting ourselves as a frontier movement, citing the frontier (now past) as an occasion for moving away from the most sound elements of our roots.

Despite this cautionary note, we do understand, at the same time, that Turner's characteristics seem to be parallel to our characteristics as well, and Garrison did us a great service in asking his questions. If, in fact, we are still influenced by some emphases of the frontier even though we now live in the waning years of the twentieth century, then we must examine them.

Such an examination may be found in Henry Webb's address to a meeting of the European Evangelistic Society in July of 1993.¹⁶ Webb notes that Garrison interprets the tensions among Disciples in the early decades of the twentieth century as an example of Garrison's second question. Cooperative Disciples, says Garrison, seeing a world no longer frontier in nature, attempt in the twentieth century to adapt to new conditions (theologically, organizationally); others (Independent Disciples) continue to invoke the themes of independence and suspicion of structures from their frontier heritage. Webb uses this point, seeing it in the frontier mentality of independence among Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, even right to the end of the century (citing the difficulties of the "Double Vision" program¹⁷). Webb affirms Garrison's call to reexamine the influences of the frontier when they may be detrimental in vastly different social, political, and economic settings.

The need to make fresh sense out of the impact of the frontier on our corporate life as a movement is perhaps more complicated than we have realized. To the degree that some of its influence is salutary, we may celebrate it; where it is a hindrance, it needs to be recognized realistically, as Dr. Webb has reminded us.

Equally important, however, is the need to see that parts of our heritage are less transitory than the frontier. Knowing this will prevent us from citing our frontier heritage as a prelude to and rationale for facile and perhaps ill-advised changes.

This point may be illustrated by an essay entitled "The Tradition of Christ." Dean E. Walker, then president of Milligan College, discussing the difficult questions of "restructure" among Disciples in the mid-sixties, expressed his concern that some "seem to suggest that the Restoration Movement crystallized around certain usages alleged to be peculiar to the culture of the American frontier, and should now be abandoned in order to create a denomination." It was not the case that Walker saw no cultural influences on the church down through the centuries or on the movement in the time of

Stone and the Campbells. Rather, "it is because they *do* (my emphasis) understand the subtle social forces that operate in every age, and because they do understand the shock to the human mind produced by the intrusion of God into history, that they take the position they hold with respect to this tradition of Christ." The genius of the movement was to emphasize not the tradition of Rome, or Geneva, or the East, but the "tradition of Christ."¹⁸ This tradition, embodied in the first proposition of the *Declaration and Address*, reaches across the eras of frontier, urbanization, industrialization, and the computer age. If we overstate the influence of the frontier, or any other force to which we have been exposed, we may run the risk of missing or even losing the best that our movement's people have had to offer.

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Notes

¹ W. E. Garrison and A. T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ: A History*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Bethany, 1958), 260.

² Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (Ann Arbor: University Microfilm, 1966).

³ George Rogers Taylor, ed., *The Turner Thesis—Problems in American Civilization* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1956), v.

⁴ W. E. Garrison, *Religion Follows the Frontier* (New York and London: Harper, 1931), xi.

⁵ Lester McAllister and William E. Tucker, *Journey in Faith* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1975), 58–59; Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 12; and Henry E. Webb, *In Search of Christian Unity* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1990), 48.

⁶ Garrison and DeGroot, 260.

⁷ Garrison and DeGroot, 77.

⁸ Winthrop S. Hudson and John Corrigan, *Religion in America*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1992), 132.

⁹ Jerry Rushford, *Christians on the Oregon Trail* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1997).

¹⁰ G. Richard Phillips, *Differences in the Theological and Philosophical Backgrounds of Alexander Campbell and Barton Warren Stone . . .* (Dissertation, Vanderbilt University; Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1969).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 446–47.

¹² *Ibid.*, 272ff.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 329.

¹⁴ Garrison, *Religion Follows the Frontier*, 310.

(Notes continued on pg. 211)