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The Restoration Movement and the Ecumenical Movement

BY ROBERT OLDHAM FIFE

The American Reformation of the nineteenth century, often called the Restoration movement, commenced as an “ecumenical” movement in the true sense of the word.¹ This is not to imply that the Stone-Campbell movement covered “the whole inhabited earth,” but it is to affirm that the *vision, principles, and practice* of the endeavor were of universal significance.²

Both of the great founding documents of the movement are authentically ecumenical. In *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* (1804), Barton Stone and his fellow revivalists dissolved their exclusive presbyterial relationship, desiring to “sink into union with the Body of Christ at large.”³ Five years later Thomas Campbell wrote in *The Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington [PA]* (1809), “The church of Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one.”⁴ Ruth Rouse

and Stephen C. Neill call the *Declaration* “one of the great milestones on the path of Christian Unity in America.”⁵

The ecumenical vision of the Stone-Campbell movement is enhanced by the fact that it did not originate in a vacuum. In 1801 a “Plan of Union” was adopted by the Presbyterian General Assembly and Congregational Associations in New England.⁶ In 1838 the Lutheran leader Samuel Schmucker issued his *Fraternal Appeal to the American Churches*.⁷ Three years later Thomas H. Vail invited “sister denominations” to join under the Episcopal structure in one “Comprehensive Church.”⁸ In 1853 the “Muhlenberg Memorial” urged Protestant Episcopal bishops to set up a more inclusive ecclesiology “as is compatible with the essential Faith and Order of the Gospel.”⁹ This was followed by William Reed Huntington’s proposal, which would create the “Catholic Church of America” (later revised as “a National

Church”) on the basis of what is now called the “Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral.”¹⁰ These developments were all precursors to the contemporary Ecumenical movement, as were the Stone-Campbell reforms.

It is significant that the pioneers of this heritage recognized their particular, historical endeavor as “the current reformation” of the church—not as the church itself. They were “voluntary advocates for church reformation.”¹¹ They constituted a community of understanding and concern that existed *within and for the service of the church*. They knew that one was not baptized into the Reformation, nor did one commune as an advocate of the Reformation; the ordinances belonged to the church. The role of the Reformation was to serve as a community of witness, calling the church to realize its “Christ-given” unity of faith, order, and life for the sake of its “Christ-given” mission in the world.¹²

Two significant events demonstrate the unitive concern of the first generation of nineteenth-century reformers. The first was the Union Meeting between the “Christians” of the Stone Reformation and the “Disciples” of the Campbellian Reformation. This meeting took place in Lexington, Kentucky, over New Year’s 1830/31.¹³ It was followed by a general flowing together of congregations from the two streams. Here was “grass roots ecumenism,” which effected union of most of the congregations that advocated the now united Reformations.

The second significant ecumenical event was the Union Christian Meeting that was held in Lexington in 1841. Called by Elder John T. Johnson “at the insistence of many persons,” it promised that “all religious parties will enjoy equal privileges.” Although Alexander Campbell did not initiate the gathering, he attended. There he offered a most significant resolution:

Resolved, That the union of Christians can be scripturally effected by requiring a practical acknowledgment of such articles of belief and such rules of piety and morality as are admitted by all Christian denominations.¹⁴

The following day, this resolution was unanimously approved, together with one offered toward the close of the meeting:

Resolved: That the Bible, and the Bible alone, is a sufficient foundation on which all

Christians may unite and build together, and that we most affectionately invite all the religious parties to investigation of this truth.¹⁵

This unity meeting, with its two resolutions, deserves far more contemporary attention than it has thus far received. Here in one assembly, what William Robinson discerned at Amsterdam (1948) as virtually incompatible “protestant” and “catholic” views of the church were embraced.¹⁶ How could the same assembly approve them both unless they took more seriously than many contemporary “restorationists” the conviction that in essence, the church, although needing reformation, has been “maintained in truth”?¹⁷

With the passing of the first generation, the term “current reformation” fell into disuse or was so reinterpreted that its distinction from the church became obscured. Whereas Thomas Campbell had appealed to “our brethren throughout all the churches,”¹⁸ some second-generation leaders such as Moses E. Lard affirmed that no unimmersed believer was a Christian.¹⁹ The grand “We” of “the church of Christ on earth” commonly became identified with the lesser “we” of the movement. Thus it could be said, “The group to which I belong is the Church Universal.”²⁰

There is little doubt that the schism that was signified in the separate census listing of 1906 seriously compromised the ecumenical appeal with which the nineteenth-century Reformation

had commenced. Nor was this rectified by continuing schisms within both fellowships.

However, in North America, Britain, and Australia, there were prominent leaders who continued to be concerned for what they considered the “catholicity” of the nineteenth-century Reformation. In the United States, three figures may be considered representative: Peter Ainslie, F. D. Kershner, and W. E. Garrison.

In 1910 Peter Ainslie²¹ led in the establishment of the Commission on Christian Union, which was the precursor to the contemporary Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Ainslie founded the *Christian Union Quarterly* in 1911. Thrilled by the Lausanne World Conference on Faith and Order (1927), Ainslie wrote:

I am willing that my denomination shall be forgotten if thereby may be hastened the unity of the Church of Christ. That denomination is most prophetic which is willing to disappear for Christ’s sake—to go to its disappearance as deliberately as Christ went to His crucifixion.²²

But F. D. Kershner was convinced that the ecumenical witness of the Campbellian heritage needed to be preserved for the whole church.²³ In his 1938 presidential address to the International Convention of Disciples of Christ, Kershner chose the theme “One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.” He declared, “The congregations represented in this

assembly came into existence in order to bear witness to the necessity for emphasizing the universal elements in their faith instead of every particularity."²⁴

W. E. Garrison also emphasized the importance of the universal in Christian faith in his famous "Fork in the Road" address.²⁵ Garrison saw the Christian Churches facing two alternatives: One was to form a tightly knit mainline denomination whose ecumenical responsibility would be to negotiate denominational mergers.²⁶ The second fork (which Garrison actually preferred) was to "press toward the ideal of becoming a microcosm of a total united church." Garrison said, "*In that case we would have no other criteria of our own unity than those which can be the bond and test of unity for the whole united church.*"²⁷ Is this not what the nineteenth-century reformers sought in their quest of the universal through recovery of "original ground" that is set forth in scripture?

In Britain, William Robinson gave ecumenical leadership to Churches of Christ, both as a participant at Amsterdam and in a long career as a teacher. Robinson noted the Amsterdam statement, "The Body of Christ is a unity. . . ," and commented, "This is so much in line with the spirit of the two Campbells." But he grieved our failure—"our inability to understand our great pioneers, to translate their work into the idiom of our own day, to make them known to the religious world of our own day, and to produce

scholars of world-wide reputation."²⁸

From Australia, E. Lyall Williams highlighted the Campbellian understanding of the relationship between the local and the universal. Williams wrote:

Long ago Alexander Campbell said: "A church of Christ at Connelsville, Philadelphia, Cincinnati or New York, is not *the church of Christ*. The church of Christ is a very large and widely extended community, and possesses a large field, even the habitable earth." So he expressed the New Testament conception of the Church as an ecumenical community, and gave a lead to a people who were born by an ecumenical vision, and whose tradition commits them to the maintenance of a tension between the local and the universal.²⁹

More recently, in the United States the restructured Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) actively participated in the Consultation on Church Union³⁰ and is now a "covenanting" denomination in COCU's successor, the Church of Christ Uniting.³¹ This has necessitated abandonment of certain historic Disciples principles, involving as it does acceptance of baptism in any "mode," episcopal polity, and clerical administration of the sacraments with lay participation *permitted*. This church is to be proclaimed on January 1, 2,000.³²

The congregational polity of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ has not lent itself to

denominational mergers negotiated "at the top." However, leaders have been "coming together in Christ" in very fruitful meetings with leaders of the Church of God (Anderson), and significant intercongregational gatherings have been held.³³ There has also been growing fellowship with a cappella Churches of Christ. Many congregations have been engaged in local ecumenical activity such as that led by Rubel Shelly of Woodmont Hills Church of Christ in Nashville. Meanwhile, some scholars are actively engaged in the Faith and Order movement.

Campbell was not unaware of the union proposals of his day. He watched the Evangelical Alliance in Europe very closely.³⁴ But he did not think organizational union was what Jesus had prayed for. He wrote:

Christian union is a more intimate, spiritual, celestial sort of thing, into which we can enter only in our individual capacity and upon our own individual responsibility. It presupposes closer acquaintance, stronger personal confidence, more spiritual attachment, a real oneness of spirit, a full coalescence of souls in the joint participation of the same holy spirit.³⁵

Such a view of unity makes it evident that believers need not await "the coming great Church" to enjoy the *gift* of the unity created by the Holy Spirit while they seek the *goal* of unity in "the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God" through "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:13, 15).

To encourage this, it would seem that the two resolutions of the 1841 Union Christian Meeting deserve our serious contemporary reconsideration.

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Notes

¹ For many Disciples, the Ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches are synonymous. However, the Ecumenical movement preceded advent of the World Council at Amsterdam in 1948. As used here, the term *ecumenical* includes many varied efforts toward Christian unity throughout the world.

² See William J. Richardson, "Alexander Campbell as an Advocate of Christian Union," in *Lectures in Honor of the Alexander Campbell Bicentennial, 1788–1988* (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1988).

³ See *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington (1809), and The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery, Centennial Edition* (Indianapolis: International Convention of Disciples of Christ, 1949). European theologian Eduard Schweizer has called the *Last Will* "one of the most amazing testimonies of the willingness of a presbytery to die, i.e., to discontinue being a separate delegated body." See Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, trans. Frank Clarke (London: SCM Press, 1961), 191 n. 717.

⁴ *Declaration and Address*, 16.

⁵ See Ruth Rouse and Stephen C. Neill, *History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517–1948* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954, 1967), 1: 237.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 232ff.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 248ff.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 249ff.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 250ff. The "Quadrilateral" has remained the basis of all subsequent

union negotiations involving the Protestant Episcopal Church. It is composed of four principles that have thus far remained nonnegotiable: (1) holy scripture as the word of God, (2) the primitive creeds, (3) the two sacraments, and (4) the historic episcopate.

¹¹ See *Declaration and Address*, 4. See also the extended series of articles entitled "The Progress of Reform," in which the terms "the Reformation," "the present reformation," and "the current reformation" are used. *Millennial Harbinger* (1832): 135ff.

¹² In his series "Restoration of the Ancient Order," Alexander Campbell anticipated several major themes of the contemporary Faith and Order movement. Among these were creeds, ministry, sacraments (ordinances), worship. See *Christian Baptist* (1823–1829).

¹³ John Augustus Williams, *Life of Elder John Smith with Some Account of the Rise and Progress of the Current Reformation* (St. Louis: Christian Publishing, 1870), 446ff.

¹⁴ See *Millennial Harbinger* (1841): 259. With an intermission for lunch, Campbell spoke to this resolution from 10 A.M. until 4 P.M.! This shall ever remain one of his most tantalizing addresses, for there seems to be no report of what Campbell said!

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁶ See William Robinson, "Evaluations of Amsterdam," in *Shane Quarterly* 10 (1949): 23.

¹⁷ The phrase is used by Hans Küng as an alternative to the Roman Catholic dogma of papal infallibility. See *The Church Maintained in Truth: A Theological Meditation*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Seabury, 1980).

¹⁸ See, e.g., *Declaration and Address*, 3.

¹⁹ See "Do the Unimmersed Commune?" in *Lard's Quarterly* 1 (September 1863; reprint, Kansas City, Mo.: Old Paths Book Club): 41ff. Lard's position is consistent with his definition of "Reformation." *Ibid.*, 5ff. For a contemporary presentation of this view, see F. LaGard Smith, *Who Is My Brother? Facing a Crisis of Identity and Fellowship* (Malibu: Cotswald, 1997).

²⁰ See David Edwin Harrell Jr., "Peculiar People: A Rationale for Modern Conservative Disciples," in Robert O. Fife, David Edwin Harrell Jr., and Ronald E. Osborn, *Disciples and the Church Universal*, Reed Lectures for 1966 (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1967), 35.

²¹ Peter Ainslie was a widely known minister of the Christian Tabernacle in Baltimore. See Finis S. Idleman, *Peter Ainslie: Ambassador of Goodwill* (Chicago, 1941).

²² Peter Ainslie, *Christian Union Quarterly* (October 1927): 119.

²³ See Frederick D. Kershner, *The Christian Union Overture: An Interpretation of the Declaration and Address of Thomas Campbell* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1923). Kershner was "free Church catholic." See A. T. DeGroot, "Disciples Are Free Church Catholics" in his *Disciple Thought: A History* (Ft. Worth: DeGroot, 1965).

²⁴ F. D. Kershner, *Christian Standard* (22 October 1938; reprint 11 April 1970): 5ff.

²⁵ W. E. Garrison, *A Fork in the Road* (Indianapolis: Pension Fund of the Christian Church, 1964). This address was delivered in 1964 when the Disciples of Christ were commencing the process of "Restructure," which would reform them into a tightly knit mainline Protestant denomination that could "responsibly" negotiate denominational mergers.

²⁶ This was the "fork" that Disciples leaders chose; the choice was consummated during the 1960s. By this process of "Restructure," the churches became a self-confessed denomination under the name "Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)."

²⁷ *Ibid.* Italics are in the original.

²⁸ Robinson, "Evaluations of Amsterdam," 25. See also William Robinson, *Churches of Christ (Disciples) and the Ecumenical Age* (Birmingham: Berean, n.d.).

²⁹ See E. Lyall Williams, *A Biblical Approach to Unity* (Melbourne, 1957), 119. Williams was long the principal of College of the Bible in Glen Iris, Melbourne, Australia. In a foreword,

(Notes continued on pg. 211)