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The Integrity of the Plea

BY LEROY GARRETT

In view of the divisions and subdivisions that have afflicted the Stone-Campbell movement, it might appear amiss to argue for the integrity of its plea, which was a plea for the unity of all believers. If integrity is seen as “complete, unimpaired, unbroken,” as Webster in part defines it, then A. T. DeGroot’s description of us as “a spectacle of divided unionists” might be more appropriate.

But, according to Webster, integrity also refers to “the quality of being of sound moral principle; uprightness, honesty, sincerity.” We might better view our heritage in these terms. Was the movement launched by our forebears moral? Was it right? Was it well intentioned and sincerely motivated, or were its founders disgruntled separatists who wanted their own church? To use more of Webster’s definition of integrity, was the plea to unite the Christians in all the sects “sound and whole”?

Integrity does not necessitate success. Our pioneers saw them-

selves as called to be faithful, not necessarily successful. Even if their dream of a united church fell short of what they hoped for, it does not mean that the dream was not sound. That is not to say they did not have some impressive successes, for they did, but it means that their plea is to be measured in terms of principles and ideals rather than results.

Moreover, if we are indeed a spectacle of divided unionists, it does not mean that their plea for unity lacked integrity. It may only mean that we have failed our heritage, not unlike the way we as Americans have often failed the democratic principles that gave birth to our republic. The integrity of a plea or an ideal is inherent in the plea or the ideal itself, not in the way its advocates utilize it.

Abe Lincoln, at Gettysburg, amidst a brutal fratricidal war, clung to the hope that a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people” would not perish from the earth, for he

believed in the integrity of the principle. Likewise, Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell, caught up in the vision of a united church, insisted that their unity movement would never divide so long as they were faithful to the principles they had forged from long years of study and commitment.

It is noteworthy that Campbell, pondering the integrity of his efforts, anticipated what some historian might one day write:

Whenever the history of this effort of reformation shall have been faithfully written, it will appear, we think, bright as the sun, that our career has been marked with a spirit of forbearance, moderation, a love of union, with an unequivocal desire for preserving integrity, harmony, and cooperation of those who teach one Lord, one faith, and one baptism.¹

In these words to his Baptist antagonist, Andrew Broaddus,

We, as a denomination, are as desirous as ever to unite and co-operate with all Christians on the broad and vital principles of the New and everlasting Covenant.

-Alexander Campbell

Campbell stated the essence of his plea: *It was a reformation effort motivated by a love for unity.* It had integrity because it was a sincere effort, “an unequivocal desire,” to create harmony and cooperation of all believers by means of forbearing love.

In this letter Campbell made several points that help to identify the genius of his plea. Though charged otherwise, he insisted that he had no desire to create a new party. His efforts in fact were of an “anti-sectarian character,” and he reminded Broaddus that while Broaddus and the Baptists in their infamous Dover Decrees had excluded him, there had not been one instance in all their churches of Campbell or his people ever having excluded a Baptist.

Campbell went on to make one of his most ecumenical gestures, and in so doing referred to his movement in a way that would embarrass many of his followers today: “We, as a denomination, are as desirous as ever to unite and co-operate with all Christians on the broad and vital principles of the New and everlasting Covenant.”

While Campbell now and again referred to his people as a denomination, he insisted that they were not a sect. He made a distinc-

tion that often eludes us: A denomination recognizes that it is only part of the church universal, and so it can with integrity be a unity movement within that church; a sect claims to be the whole of the body of Christ, and any plea it would make for unity would lack integrity in that it would be no more than a demand for conformity to itself.

In another interesting dimen-

Let the unity of Christians be our polar star.

-Barton Stone

sion of the letter to Broaddus, Campbell defended Barton W. Stone against the charge of not believing in the “atonement or expiation of the blood of Christ,” as Broaddus had put it. Broaddus had noticed that in a Stone/Campbell discussion on the death of Christ, Campbell had had to remind Stone of his neglect of any reference to what Broaddus called “that great truth” of the atonement, upon which he and Campbell could find unity. But how about unity between Campbell and his “venerable correspondent,” Barton W. Stone, Broaddus had wondered.

Campbell was magnanimous, urging Broaddus that “we not judge too soon” in reference to Stone’s views. He was sure that Stone’s omission of the “expiatory designs of the Messiah’s death” was unintentional and that, while he might avoid the use of certain theological lingo, Stone believed that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.

Here we have a clue as to why the movement has both endured and faltered: the earlier disposition to withhold hurtful judgment, the later disposition to both judge and divide. While the two founders of the movement, Stone and Campbell, could freely discuss their rather substantial theological differences, they always remained brothers in fellowship, agreeing to disagree and withholding judgment

of each other. In succeeding generations “editor bishops” arose with an apparent incapacity for this “spirit of forbearance,” as Campbell called it, which he considered vital to his cause.

As for Barton W. Stone, he nowhere stated the essence of the plea better than in his “An Address to the Churches of Christ.”² The occasion called for both substance and clarity. He had just helped effect a union between his Christian Churches and Campbell’s Disciples of Christ (1832), which he deemed the “noblest act” of his life. But it was a fragile union, and

We profess to stand upon the Bible alone, and contend that opinions of truth should not be made terms of fellowship.

- Barton Stone

this address was an effort to solidify it.

It was in this address that Stone inaugurated his great motto, which today is cut in marble under his likeness on a cenotaph in the garden of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society in Nashville: *Let the unity of Christians be our polar star*. The motto was inspired by Jesus' high-priestly prayer for the unity of his followers (John 17). Stone insisted that anyone who opposes Christian unity is opposing the prayer of Jesus and the salvation of the world.

In likening the church to a ship at sea that stays on course only by being guided by the polar star, Stone urged, "To this [unity] let our eyes be continually turned, and to this let our united efforts be directed—that the world may believe and be saved."

Stone was saying that unity is the church's polar star, and that it is only a united church that can reach a lost world. This was always basic to the plea: Not only is division among Christians a sin, it obstructs the mission of the church in saving the world. A divided church is therefore intolerable.

Even though he and Campbell were the acknowledged leaders of their respective movements, he sought to put the two of them in

proper perspective: "Campbell and Stone are but fallible men, and therefore should not be followed farther than they follow Christ." He even applauded with an "Amen!" those among his readers who opposed Stone's "Arianism" and Campbell's "Campbellism." But he cautioned them to take heed lest in fighting against "an image made by yourself" they be found opposing the truth of God.

And it was in this address that Stone stressed what became the hallmark of the movement and the basis of its integrity: *We profess to stand upon the Bible alone, and contend that opinions of truth should not be made terms of fellowship*. "In opinions, liberty" thus found its way into one of our unity mottoes, referred to below.

The uniting churches had their differences, Stone admitted, such as the design of baptism, but these differences were but opinions. He urged that since they were criticized by the sects for the essentials they held in common, they should not oppose each other over opinions. "A little longer forbearance with each other's weakness, and truth will triumph" was an admonition that came to characterize his life.

But to Stone, "the crowning blessing of all blessings," as he described it in the address, was the

gift of the Holy Spirit, which is given to those who believe, reform, and are baptized. This conviction became the basis of one of his favorite sermons, the "Four Unities." Three are false unities: book unity, head unity, and water unity. Only "fire unity," the unity that is the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, is valid.

We can observe at this point that the plea emerged and endured because it was founded on biblical principles by principled leaders. Stone and Campbell were projecting not themselves but an ideal, and they had no interest in building a party around themselves. They were sincerely committed to uniting the Christians in all the sects. They sought to do this by moral suasion based on biblical principles.

However, what may be the most perceptive view of the genius of the plea comes not from Stone or Campbell but from Robert Richardson. He was a physician to the Campbell family and the Bethany community, a professor at Bethany College, and an associate with Campbell in editing the movement's leading journal, the *Millennial Harbinger*. He also authored the two-volume, 1600-page *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* (1867), which served as the movement's first definitive history.

In 1852 Richardson published an 88-page treatise, *The Principles and Objects of the Religious Reformation, Urged by A. Campbell and Others, Briefly Stated and Explained*. Campbell, noting Richardson's twenty-five-year association with the Reforma-

The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one. . .

tion, hailed it as “a well proportioned miniature” of the plea. Richardson’s own biographer referred to it as a “Disciple Manifesto,” and it could be viewed as an *apologia* for the integrity of the movement.

At the outset the doctor placed the plea within the Reformed tradition, explaining that its purpose was to take up where the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation had left off. Reformation is never a fait accompli, but an ongoing process. However acute a reformer’s mind may be, he cannot, when first aroused from the lethargy of ages, comprehend at a glance the whole of divine truth.

The movement’s mission was not, therefore, to disparage the labors and learning of past reformers, Richardson allowed, or to discredit the doctrines of Protestantism, but to advance in Christian knowledge and make larger discoveries of truth. To do this, it sought to restore “a pure primitive Christianity in form and spirit, in principle and practice.”

To realize such ends, the doctor argued that people must be free to study and think for themselves and not be bound by human creeds. He thus named “liberty of conscience and right of private judgment” as imperatives for an ongoing reformation.

-Thomas Campbell

He spoke of the heart of the plea in saying, “This reformation was born of a love of union, and Christian union has been its engrossing theme.” The basis of such unity is the common faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, or the facts of the gospel. He thus distinguished between the gospel and the Bible.

The early Christians did not unite on the “Bible alone,” as some of his own people were claiming, but upon the “gospel alone,” for they did not then have the Bible as we know it. The gospel is God’s power to save through Christ, he urged, not the whole of revelation. He put it another way by saying, “That alone which saves men can unite them.”

Richardson held that it is only through this “generalization of Christianity” that believers can unite. It was a restless zeal for particular doctrines that had divided the church into a multiplicity of sects. When the church unites upon the gospel or the general truths of Christianity, it can allow liberty of opinion in particular doctrines. This does not mean that purity of doctrine is unimportant, but only that unity can never come by conformity to any doctrinal system.

In making these distinctions, Richardson quoted from Thomas Campbell’s *Declaration and*

Address to the effect that fellowship is based upon gospel truth and not upon a proper understanding of all doctrinal matters.

Thus in the very beginning of this effort to reform religious society, the subject matter of a saving or essential faith was distinguished both from the uninspired deductions of human reason, and from those divine teachings which, however necessary to enable the believer to make proper advances to Christian knowledge, are by no means necessary to Christian faith.

In referencing Thomas Campbell in this context, the doctor was alluding to another principle that gave integrity to the plea, one that loomed large in the thinking of both of the Campbells—*catholicity*. As the elder Campbell put it in his first principle in his *Declaration and Address*:

The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one, consisting of all those everywhere who profess their faith in Christ and obey him in all things according to the scriptures.

When Thomas Campbell penned these words in 1809, he did not yet have a single congregation called “Church of Christ.” The first one was yet two years in coming. But still he spoke of the Church of Christ on earth as a reality. This makes it evident that he had no illusions of restoring the true

church as if it did not exist. The church *did* exist, and it was catholic by nature, consisting of all followers of Christ everywhere. And it was one by nature. The Campbells sought to reform the church by reclaiming its essential unity and catholicity.

When Alexander Campbell, writing to a Roman Catholic, referred to his longtime effort “to unite all Protestant Christians on one great bond of union,” he pointed to his catholicity. “Even on the subject of baptism,” he said, “I am perfectly *catholic*” (his emphasis). Campbell meant that he advocated the baptism that all believers admit to be both apostolic and divine. He was not Greek or Roman Catholic, just catholic.³

By 1839 Alexander Campbell conceded that while unity had long been his “darling theme,” he had not before clearly seen what he now saw—the “catholic grounds” for the visible and harmonious union of all believers. He now had “the rule of union,” catholicity, which he would publicly propose: “Whatever in faith, in piety, and morality is catholic, or universally admitted by all parties, shall be adopted as the basis of union.”⁴

The intent of the plea, therefore, was catholic, not sectarian or provincial, and this gave it integrity. Dean Frederick Kershner spoke of this heritage before the International Convention of 1937 when he said that he had no interest in belonging to a denomination that sprang from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment or owed its origin to John Locke or Alexander Campbell.

Kershner insisted that he belonged to “the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of Christ founded by our Lord and made known to the world through the New Testament Scriptures.”⁵ The dean got it right. We are catholics, not Stoneites or Campbellites, and that is our integrity.

More recent interpreters of the plea would include William T. Moore, who in 1909 authored the monumental, 830-page *Comprehensive History of the Disciples of Christ*. Even though the Disciples of Christ were now a century old and a widely recognized denomination, Moore insisted that he was writing about a *movement* rather than a church. It was a move against sectarianism and for freedom of thought and individual interpretation.

Whatever in faith, in piety, and morality is catholic, or universally admitted by all parties, shall be adopted as the basis of union.

-Alexander Campbell

The aim of the plea, according to Moore, was to reform all denominations by bringing them into harmony with the New Testament. He affirmed its integrity: “It was an honest, hearty plea for Christian union.” He was unique in attempting to capture the essence of the movement in what he called “mathematical language.” He put it this way: “The Disciples have always contended for the greatest possible numerator with the least possible denominator.”⁶

He meant by this the greatest possible individual liberty (numerator) with the fewest possible requirements (denominator). It was another way of stating the motto referred to above: In essentials (as few as possible—basically, loyalty to Christ), unity; in opinions (as much latitude and diversity as possible without compromising basic truth), liberty.

Moore affirmed another motto that he considered most revealing of what his people stood for: *We are free to differ but not to divide*. He saw this realized when the movement held its Centennial Celebration in Pittsburgh in 1909, one hundred years after the publication of Thomas Campbell’s *Declaration and Address*. The missionaries who had come from around the world differed as to

how to go about their work. But that was all right, Moore allowed, for “it has always been regarded as the God-given right of every Disciple of Christ to differ but not to divide.”⁷

Moore chose to ignore the division that had created the Churches of Christ as a separate group shortly before he published his history. To him, the movement at that time was still generally united and that was the reason: they were free to differ but not to divide.

Interestingly enough, Moore in his centennial history of the movement dealt with the question we are considering: Why had the plea survived for a hundred years? He insisted that only “providential oversight” could explain all that had happened. That providence, he said, was seen in three dimensions: (1) the time was propitious, (2) the place was ideal, and (3) the persons who inaugurated it had both talent and ideas. How can we explain that “immortal document,” the *Declaration and Address*, which gave the plea its first great impulse, except by providence? Moore asked.

The founding pioneers were “men of Providence,” Moore said. He identified eight men who gave the plea its auspicious beginning, naming the principle contribution of each: Barton Stone gave it toleration, Thomas Campbell gave it heart, Alexander Campbell gave it strength, Walter Scott gave it evangelistic fervor, Robert Richardson gave it exegetical correctness, Raccoon John Smith gave it common sense, John T. Johnson gave it energy and hope, and John Rogers exemplified the plea.⁸

Moore may have been right that these traits are the stuff of reformation. A review of the numerous efforts of reform leading up to Luther and the Protestant Reformation suggests that they floundered from a lack of these traits, especially in reference to principles of reform. To survive, a reformation must have the substance that only sound biblical principles can provide. So we say

again, in a different way, that it was principles that gave the plea its integrity.

Even so, in Moore’s thinking, with all of this going for it at the outset, the plea also might have floundered had it not been for the union of the Stone and Campbell forces in 1832. The union gave it balance; it would have otherwise been excessive and mechanical, or too emotional, or too rational. Even tendencies toward Calvinism (Campbell side) and Arminianism (Stone side) found balance. The union of the two movements served as a paradigm for the principles they advocated—particularly, that unity is in catholicity rather than in particulars. To put it another way, in their diversity they accepted the Spirit’s gift of unity.⁹

William J. Richardson, in an intriguing analysis, sees the Lexington union of 1832 as far more than a testimonial to what the plea meant in its own time. He finds it anticipating what recent ecumenical leaders have said about the nature of unity, particularly the definitions given by Faith and Order conferences at New Delhi (1961) and Montreal (1963).

Contemporary ecumenists recognize that unity is a gift of God and the will of God, Richardson notes, quoting the New Delhi definition. It is given by grace to all those baptized into Christ, and it is based upon the confession that Jesus is Lord and Savior.

Furthermore, unity is a committed fellowship that involves the one apostolic faith, the one gospel,

the breaking of bread, and witness. These things are “made visible in each place.” Unity is thus both local and catholic. It is manifested locally “in each place,” and at the same time, it is “in all places and in all ages.”

At Lexington, Richardson observes, our forebears anticipated these biblical principles: unity is given; unity is essential. Neither group felt that they were “going to the other side.” Unity is both local and universal, expressed in “in each place,” as the New Delhi ecumenists put it.

And at Lexington each side lost some of its distinctiveness, always a fruit of true unity. The less distinctive we become, the more we will think in terms of the church catholic. Richardson notes that Barton Stone was that way in the criticisms made against the Campbell people, treating such criticisms as against the brotherhood as a whole.¹⁰

In the Forrest F. Reed Lectures of 1976, Ronald E. Osborn argued persuasively that the essence of the plea was that it was an “Experiment in Liberty.” Our founding pioneers were freedom riders, he avowed. He noted that nowhere is this passion for freedom better expressed than in an inscription in the entrance porch of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society in Nashville. It reads in part:

THAT MEN ARE ENDOWED BY
GOD WITH EQUAL RIGHTS TO THINK
AND ACT FOR THEMSELVES IN ALL
MATTERS OF BELIEF AND PRACTICE;
THAT A DIVIDED CHURCH
IS SIN AND THE SPIRIT OF LOVE AND
UNITY, LIBERTY AND CONCORD, IS TO

BE RESTORED BY CASTING OFF THE
SHACKLES OF HUMAN TRADITIONS
AND RETURNING TO THE ORIGINAL
FAITH AND ORDER OF THE CHURCH
OF CHRIST;
THAT BELIEF IN JESUS THE
CHRIST AND OBEDIENCE TO HIM AS
LORD IS THE ONLY TEST OF CHRISTIAN
CHARACTER AND THE ONLY
BOND OF CHRISTIAN UNION.

This inscription, authored by Eva Jean Wrather of Nashville, one of the founders of the historical society, captures the heart of the plea: a divided church is a sin, and the way to unity is to make loyalty to Christ the only test of unity and fellowship. The inscription describes the pioneers of this movement as “men of the adventurous spirit of the new age of freedom and enlightenment” and says that their aim was nothing less than “a thorough reformation of all things civil and religious.”

Osborn sees this passion for freedom, along with unity and restoration, as the plea’s “Three-Part Formula.” He points out that our history is a story of interaction between these commitments—unity, restoration, liberty—with

periodic shifts of one or another into a position of dominance. He suggests that the three have been so intertwined in our thinking that it is difficult to discuss any one of them apart from the other two. Our love for freedom, he allows, has made us revolutionaries who founded new institutions. Like the founders of our republic, we too have been rebels!¹¹

This mandate for a free church made its way into our most meaningful slogan, which well summarizes the integrity of the plea:

*In essentials, unity;
In opinions, liberty;
In all things, love.*

That says it. That is who we are, and that is our integrity. All believers can unite upon the fundamentals of the Christian faith. In nonessentials—opinions, methods, theories, scruples—let there be freedom. Love has the power to “bind everything together in perfect harmony” (Col 3:14). Whenever we make opinions the basis of unity, we both sin against our heritage and compromise our integrity as a people.

LEROY GARRETT taught for a number of years at Texas Women’s College, Denton, Texas. His commitment to the Restoration plea perhaps is without peer.

Notes

¹ Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger* (1840): 556.

² Barton W. Stone, “An Address to the Churches of Christ,” *Christian Messenger* (1832): 263.

³ Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger* (1837): 112.

⁴ Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger* (1839): 212.

⁵ Frederick Kershner, quoted in Ronald Osborn, *Renewal of the Church*, 1:340.

⁶ William T. Moore, *Comprehensive History of the Disciples of Christ* (New York: Revell, 1909), v.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 820.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 778–79.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 880.

¹⁰ William J. Richardson, *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 17 (1982): 71–72.

¹¹ Ronald E. Osborn, *Experiment in Liberty* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1978), 85–90.