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Gary Holloway
gary.holloway@lipscomb.edu

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Restoring God's House: Ecclesiology in Churches of Christ

BY GARY HOLLOWAY

Theology in Churches of Christ can be best described, not as thin, but as spotty. We have overemphasized some doctrines at the expense of others that were as important, if not more important. The doctrine of the church is one area where our theology has been strong—so strong, in fact, that in the middle decades of the twentieth century, it eclipsed all other doctrines in Churches of Christ. How did we get to such a point, and what can be done to put ecclesiology in its proper perspective?

Alexander Campbell on Restoring the Church

When Thomas Campbell penned the *Declaration and Address* in 1809, his primary theme was the unity of the church: "Prop. 1. That the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one." Thomas Campbell believed the church could enjoy that unity if it would leave behind the doctrines that divided Christians to practice those teachings "expressly exhibited" in the New Testament. Phrases such as "expressly exhibited," "plain," "clear," "manifest," "simple," and "original pattern" occur more than sixty times in the *Declaration and Address*. To Thomas Campbell, the essentials of faith and the shape of the church should be plain to all.

However, he (perhaps wisely) never spelled out

exactly what the express shape of the church was and should be. His son Alexander was not so reticent. In "A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things," a series of thirty articles published in the *Christian Baptist* between 1825 and 1829, Alexander Campbell clearly laid out the original pattern of the church.

The content of most of Campbell's articles is not surprising to those of us in the Churches of Christ. Five of the articles deal with general principles of restoration. Two list the dangers of creeds. Nine of the thirty articles are on worship, with four arguing for weekly communion. Five articles are on church offices, bishops, deacons, and others. What might surprise some who unfairly characterize Campbell as an unfeeling rationalist are the two articles—"Spirit and Temper of Mind of the Ancient Order" and "Devotion to God's Will"—in which Campbell recounts his own religious experience. Also potentially surprising to contemporary church members are his seven articles on church discipline. To Campbell, the purpose of restoring the ancient order was not to be legalistically correct, but to make the church the school of discipleship and devotion to Christ that it was intended to be.

Why did both Campbells speak so much about the church to the neglect of other doctrines? Did they think the doctrines about God, Christ, the Holy

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Spirit, salvation, and last things were less important than the church? No. Both Campbells had a broad theological and classical education and could place the doctrine of the church in a broader theological context. So why didn't they teach more about those fundamental doctrines instead of focusing on the church?

The answer is found in the metaphor of "restoration." To the Campbells, restoring the church was not the same as building it from scratch; it was not as though the church had completely disappeared, but it had deteriorated through the years and needed to be restored according to the original plans. Think of buying an old house, finding the original plans, and attempting to restore it. Essential portions of the house may be sound and original—the foundation and plumbing, for example—while others need replacing. Newer additions must be removed to return the house to its original condition. Older sections must be rebuilt.

The Campbells faced a similar situation. They wanted to remove unwanted additions to the church and restore to it certain aspects that had been lost through the years. Their purpose was "to bring the Christianity and the church of the present up to the New Testament standard."¹ In attempting to do so, they found that much of the Christianity of their day was sound and original. They generally agreed with Protestants on their view of God, of christology, of soteriology (except on baptism for remission of sins), and of eschatology. Where they felt Protestantism was wanting was in certain aspects of its doctrine of the church. That was what needed restoring.

This is clearly seen in Alexander Campbell's treatment of the Apostles' Creed. Although he was consistently against creeds as tests of fellowship, he

wrote, "We never objected to a creed properly so called. We have a creed—an apostolic creed."² Then he went on to quote the Apostles' Creed and added to it baptism for the remission of sins, weekly communion, and other "facts or articles of belief." Campbell did not emphasize the basic articles of the Apostles' Creed, even though he thought them central in importance, because the churches of his day already believed them. Instead, he focused on those areas the church still lacked. In restoring an old house, if the foundation is sound, it can be neglected. That does not mean that it is less important, but simply that it is less needful of urgent attention.

From the Campbells to Today

If a foundation is neglected for too long, however, serious problems develop. That is what occurred after the death of Alexander Campbell. In the North after the Civil War, the forces of industrialization, urbanization, and American optimism worked to change the ideal of restoration. Over time, the size of God's house became more important than the shape; ecumenicity became an end in itself instead of a result of restoration. Eventually, among Disciples of Christ, restoration was dropped as an unrealistic ideal that actually got in the way of ecumenical action.

In the South after the war, the Campbells' ideal of restoration was subverted in another direction. Instead of being viewed as an ongoing process, restoration increasingly came to be seen as an accomplished fact. God's house did not need to be restored, only preserved. This fortress mentality was reinforced by the harsh social and economic realities of Reconstruction. Although there were many prominent leaders who fought against this mentality and preserved the ideal of restoration, by the 1920s and 1930s, when Churches of Christ were being given their distinctive shape, most members of the church had come to assume that they were the Only Christians, or at least the Only "Christians only."

Disciples in the South in the generations after Campbell also had fewer educational opportunities. American anti-intellectualism was intensified in Reconstruction South. Most in Churches of Christ thought theological education was at best unnecessary and at worst destructive to the faith. In this way,

the doctrine of the church was cut loose from the larger theological understanding that had grounded it at the time of the Campbells.

Thus most of us who grew up in the church in the 1940s and 1950s remember constant sermons and lessons on the church, but few on the other cardinal doctrines of Christianity. Churches of Christ grew considerably in this period by focusing on those areas where we disagreed with our religious neighbors. We could assume agreement with them on most doctrines, since we lived in a "Christian" culture where belief in God, Christ, and the Bible were taught even in the public schools.

By the 1960s the culture was changing. No longer could we assume that Americans agreed on God, Christ, and the Bible. Churches of Christ changed, too. Our "discovery of grace" was a much-needed antidote to the legalism that infected most of the church. However, much of our understanding of grace was shaped by a pluralistic and secular culture. To many in our churches, grace simply meant that the old standards were lowered. Many who thought themselves free from legalism still thought in legalistic patterns. Where before we would avoid a church practice because it was "unscriptural," now we felt free to make changes because "there's no verse against it."

Current Ecclesiology in Churches of Christ

Currently then, our ecclesiology in Churches of Christ is under considerable question. The perception that we are not growing as fast as we once did is leading many to question how we do church. Some propose changes in the church, particularly in worship, that are designed to bring in the unchurched "seeker." Most of the changes proposed have their roots in the evangelical megachurches or in the independent charismatic movement. Little has been done to implement these changes from a restorationist perspective. Instead, some have lampooned our time-tested worship practices as senseless traditions, while ignoring that the changes they propose have a tradition, too. The question is not, Will we be traditional in our view of the church? but, Which tradition will we follow?

At the same time, some oppose all changes in

the Churches of Christ, assuming that the biblical pattern has been perfectly restored. Although they may claim to follow "the old paths," in reality their paths are not old enough. They go back to the sectarian "hard style" of Churches of Christ in the 1920s and 1930s, not all the way back to the balanced ideal

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of restoration of the Campbells.

Thus one question that must be answered regarding our ecclesiology is the question of tradition. The first task we face in developing a contemporary biblical theology is to ask, "What is our traditional doctrine of the church?" Is it the Campbellian view that there are Christians in all denominations; that we seek to be "Christians only, not the only Christians"; and that we want to restore to the church universal certain doctrines it has neglected, such as the importance of believers' immersion, weekly communion, and local church leadership? Or is it our traditional view that we are the only Christians; that baptism saves regardless of attitude; that communion is merely a weekly duty; and that elders rule the church with an iron hand?

The church still needs to be reformed. Restorationism is still a noble goal: to restore to Churches of Christ certain practices they have neglected. However, responsible traditions enable responsible change. We should reform the church according to its tradition—or, perhaps better, we should reform it according to the *best* of its tradition. Such a reform requires us to stop our thoughtless tradition-bashing that makes for cheap humor but little wisdom. Instead, we should develop an appreciation for those who passed the faith on to us. We may disagree with them, even on the shape of the church, but we should disagree with respect and only after

we have taken their teachings and practices seriously.

After wrestling with our tradition, our second task is to form a contemporary biblical ecclesiology that is not divorced from the other major doctrines of the Christian faith. Restoring the church today must include restoring the foundational teachings about God, Christ, the Spirit, and humanity that our culture no longer teaches. This theological task is not just the work of scholars; it should be done in the context of the community of faith. Our scholarship must be done in and for the church. More than that, we must train each minister and each member to think theologically, that is, to put our traditional practices in a wider biblical context. Or perhaps we need our members and ministers to train us how to do the same.

Our third task is to form our ecclesiology in the light of other Christian traditions. That means learning from them, but it also means being bold enough to offer to them the things we have learned. Stanley Grenz has written, "For some time the doctrine of the church has been the neglected stepchild of evangelical theology."³ The very issues Alexander Campbell dealt with—church membership, government, and worship—are facing evangelicals today. We must not abandon one of the strengths of our movement, our ecclesiology, at the very time that many evangelical leaders are calling for a renewed emphasis on the biblical doctrine of the church.

Some progress has already been made toward a

rethinking of our ecclesiology. Leonard Allen's *The Cruciform Church* (ACU Press, 1990), calls Churches of Christ to center their identity in the cross. However, the ecclesiology of the book is more Lutheran than restorationist; it gives few details on the shape of the church. Randy Harris and Rubel Shelly give a more complete ecclesiology in *The Second Incarnation* (Howard, 1992), although their work would have been strengthened by a more sympathetic portrayal of the best of our tradition. Everett Ferguson's *The Church of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1996) will be the starting point for future discussion of the church.

The doctrine of the church will continue to loom large in our theology, and for good reason. God did not reveal himself in Christ merely to lone individuals. Instead, he chose to continue his incarnation in a community of fallible and sinful people. As his people, we must understand who we are and strive by his grace to be what we are, the house of the living God.

Gary Holloway is dean of the College of Bible and Ministry at Lipscomb University, Nashville, Tennessee.

Notes

¹ Campbell, *Christian Baptist 2* (1824/25): 133.

² Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger*, 4th ser., 6 (1856): 701.

³ Stanley Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), 164.