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The Scotch Baptist Influence on the Disciples of Christ



By John Owston

Today there is a large segment of the Restoration Movement that disavows any connection whatsoever with the Baptists. Unfortunately, there are many ministers in both the a cappella Churches of Christ and the independent Christian Churches who view the Baptists as our enemies, rather than our brothers. This is particularly unfortunate when one realizes that we have much in common. Indeed, a number of church historians and other scholars view the Disciples of Christ as part of the "Baptist family."¹ These similarities, of course, are not accidental. This is particularly true with regard to the Scotch Baptists, who differed from other Baptist bodies in certain ways. Interestingly enough, some of the ways in which they differed from other Baptists put them in closer proximity to some common Disciple² practices.

To be sure, many influences came into play regarding some of our present practices, British roots being particularly significant.³ I would assert that one of the strongest influences upon Disciples came from the Scotch Baptists. Or perhaps a better way to understand some of our common practices is to realize that some of the Scottish religious movements that influenced the Scotch Baptists also influenced Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott.

The one movement that had a significant impact upon both the Scotch Baptists *and* Disciples was that of John Glas and Robert Sandeman. The Glasites could be dated from 1728, the year Glas was removed from the ministry of the Church of Scotland. One of the first points of contention that Glas had with the established church had to do with church polity. Like the Radical Reformers, Glas came to conclude that the church and state should not be linked

(as they were in Scotland). Each congregation should be independent and self-governing, and should follow no particular creed, but be governed by the holy scriptures alone. As Glas himself stated, the congregational issue was not a critical one when he began his ministry.

I had not then considered the controversy between the Presbyterians and them of the congregational way, but took up the common report against the congregational business, that it is near confusion. . . . Thus I thought myself a sound Presbyterian, and accordingly declared myself so, by subscribing to the Formula. And when I entered upon the work of the ministry, and was settled in a parish as a public teacher, I again declared myself a Presbyterian, and subscribed to the Formula.⁴

However, within ten years of his ordination, Glas would be more in sympathy with the so-called "independents" than with the established kirk. Once he renounced belief in the concept of a national church, he then refused to obey their directives and was defrocked, in spite of the fact that he was held in high esteem by many ministers. With some devoted followers Glas founded an independent congregation in Dundee, the first of a number of congregations that were dubbed "Glasites." It is estimated that there were about thirty of these "Glasite" churches throughout Britain.

What is particularly interesting is that at least four of the practices of the Glasite churches seem to have made their way into the Disciples: (1) the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper; (2) the plurality of elders; (3) distinguishing the Lord's Day from the Sabbath; and (4) the use

of scriptural names for local congregations, primarily, "Church of Christ."⁵ Later, we will see how the views of Glas influenced the Scotch Baptists, but now let us consider in more detail the beliefs of the Glasites.

First, Glas (like many religious reformers) placed a great deal of emphasis upon the scriptures as the sole rule of faith and practice. Earlier reformers had done this, but not to the exclusion of religious creeds. Concerning man-made creeds, Glas believed that they might be helpful in setting forth the beliefs of a body of churches or in opposing heresy, but he did not believe creeds to be authoritative. This would be a belief shared by the Disciples and Baptists in general.

Concerning the ministry, Glas concluded that there were ordinary and extraordinary officers in the church. The ordinary officers included elders and deacons. Glas especially emphasized the eldership, which he concluded from a study of the New Testament must be plural in nature.⁶ Glas believed in ordination, but not that it conveyed special sacerdotal authority. "Elders were to be chosen to office by the membership of the church they served, and ordained by other elders by laying on of hands and the right hand of fellowship."⁷ There was to be no official distinction between clergy and laity, and those who were selected as elders had to meet the scriptural qualifications to the letter. The elders were to carry on the affairs of the local church without compensation while continuing in their current occupations. There are, of course, some Churches of Christ and Baptists in America today who take such a view toward their elders.

Concerning the Lord's Supper, the Glasites decided that a weekly communion service was in order.

It has been observed at the first meeting of Mr. Glas and his adherents they agreed to observe the Lord's Supper more frequently than was the practice of the Church of Scotland, viz., once every month; but soon found that they had as little warrant from the Scriptures for this practice as the Church of Scotland had for theirs, as the first Disciples came together on the first day of the week for the breaking of bread; and they agreed that in this, as in everything else, they ought to be followers of the first churches, being guided and directed by the scriptures alone.⁸

Glas also concluded that communion should be closed, a practice uncommon to Disciples, but prevalent among Scotch (and other) Baptists. Glas said, "It is our duty to forebear communion with them that have no appearance of

being disciples of Christ."⁹ Pretty much in keeping with the Scottish Presbyterianism from which Glas sprang, he focused on the commemorative nature of the Lord's Supper.

His doctrine of the Lord's Supper emphasized the commemorative and declaratory aspects of the sacraments. While it is a real communion of the Body and Blood of Christ the sign must not be confused with that which is signified, viz., the sacrificial death of Christ. That sacrifice has been made once for all and cannot be repeated in the Sacrament which represents it and assures its benefits.¹⁰

The Glasites found a worship pattern in Acts 2:42, which some congregations followed rather strictly. Disciples have also seen in this passage a basic pattern for congregational worship. In fact, there are some one-cup Churches of Christ in America that rigidly follow this pattern. In another important way, both Disciples and Baptists have inherited Glasite practice: our propensity to divide into other parties when we cannot agree. This, I believe, is an inherent danger in any "restoration" or "back to the Bible" movement. We cannot often agree on what needs to be restored from the original church. To some degree, the Glasites were more consistent than many Disciples in this regard. For example, the Love Feast was regularly observed between the morning and evening services, the holy kiss was initiated, and foot washing was practiced. Foot washing as a church ordinance is quite common today among Old Regular and Freewill Baptist churches. And I might add that the only time I was ever kissed by a man was when I visited a Freewill Baptist church in Kentucky and was greeted with a "holy kiss" by one of the deacons. Membership in Glasite churches came through a profession of faith and examination by the entire church, which is fairly characteristic of many Baptist churches. The new member was then welcomed with the laying on of hands and the holy kiss.¹¹ Some early Baptist churches in America also laid hands on new members immediately following their baptisms. This brings us to the topic of baptism. Glas retained his Presbyterian belief regarding baptism; namely, that it was a sign of what was already received and that the mode was inconsequential. In fact, he wrote an extant work entitled *A Letter on the Salvation of Infants* in which he defended infant baptism. The view of Glas on baptism would be the one primary difference between his movement and the Scotch

Baptists. Nevertheless, Scottish Baptists today recognize the profound impact that Glas had on present-day practices among Baptist churches in Scotland.¹²

Equal in stature to Glas was his son-in-law Robert Sandeman (1718–1771), without whom the movement would probably have died. Both Glas and Sandeman had a different view of faith than many of their contemporaries.

In theology Glas was a Calvinist, firmly convinced of the doctrines of election and of saving grace. His view of faith was, however, unusual for he held that there was a danger of confusing faith with its effects. He and his followers defined faith as a bare belief in the facts of the gospel, and excluded feelings and fruits. This intellectualist idea of faith must have appealed to those who were tired of looking for signs and motions of the heart, and who had been the victims of over-emotional preaching of the gospel. Glas and Sandeman offered a simple, unfussy view of gospel truth, and a church life regulated in all its details. As the years went by, Glas led his churches further into isolation from other Christians, and their exclusiveness and reluctance to evangelize make their survival to the present day the more remarkable.¹³

Perhaps more than Glas, Sandeman emphasized the intellectual nature of faith. It was while Alexander Campbell was a student in Glasgow that he was introduced to the works of Glas and Sandeman by Greville Ewing. Perhaps more than any other factor, this influenced Campbell to break with Presbyterianism. This view of faith would be a hallmark of the Disciples and was one of the major stumbling blocks to ongoing fellowship with the Baptists in America.¹⁴

As mentioned earlier, the goal of the Glasites and Sandemanians was to restore New Testament Christianity. This, of course, was a worthy goal, but the approach of Glas and Sandeman was akin to that of some within the Disciples, which simply led to more divisions.

[T]he Glasite movement . . . searched the New Testament for the minutest detail in the life of the church. . . . [They] were completely preoccupied with the duty of restoring the practices of the primitive church. They had no interest in unity, and not enough evangelistic zeal to keep them alive.¹⁵

While a movement like ours has been influenced by many forces, the Scotch Baptist influence—and those who influenced them—has been significant.

Having laid that foundation, we turn our attention more specifically to the Scotch Baptists, who were no doubt influenced by Glas and Sandeman, and have even been dubbed “Sandemanian Baptists.” Archibald McClean (1733–1812) and Robert Carmichael are considered founding fathers among Scotch Baptists (though they were not the first Baptists in Scotland). As one writer said, “The sources for Scottish Baptist life before the foundation of the Union in 1869 remain tantalizingly scanty.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, both McClean and Carmichael were influenced by Glas and were for a time members of the Glasite church in Glasgow. Like Glas, they saw in the scriptures a model for church life for all time and sought to restore primitive Christianity.

Scotch Baptists often trace their origins to a conversation between McClean and Carmichael in 1763. The conversation concerned the topic of baptism, and both agreed that they should search the scriptures concerning this question. Of course, at this point they had already come to accept the common Glasite beliefs outlined earlier. McClean first concluded that baptism was for believers only and that the proper mode was immersion. For a time Carmichael remained unconvinced, but he later came to the same conclusion as his longtime friend. By 1765 both men had come to the Baptist position on baptism.¹⁷

With no one in all of Scotland to immerse him, Carmichael made his way to London, where he was immersed by John Gill in a public ceremony that included six hundred onlookers. The event created much interest, even public criticisms from a number of pedobaptists in London. This led Dr. Gill to have his sermon on the day of Carmichael’s baptism printed in the newspaper. The sermon was based on 1 John 5:3 and included three points: (1) water baptism is a command of Christ; (2) being a com-

mand, it ought to be obeyed; and (3) it is a command not grievous.¹⁸

Carmichael returned to Edinburgh and baptized several, and a Baptist church was formed, with Carmichael as pastor. McClean journeyed to Edinburgh from Glasgow and he was immersed by Carmichael. Being the first Baptist in Glasgow was not without consequences, however.

The sensation created in Glasgow on the report spreading that a Baptist being in the city, was most amazing. Some were filled with wonder, others with contempt, and all with a determination to oppose the innovation. Friends and foes were alike hostile. Mr. McClean was pointed at with scorn. His business as a letter-press printer went from him, and to avoid poverty, he and his family were necessitated to withdraw from the city about the close of 1767.¹⁹

McClean became a prolific writer producing a number of works defending characteristic Baptist practices. Included were such titles as "Defense of Believers Baptism"; "Nature and Import of Baptism"; "Belief of the Gospel Saving Faith"; and "Conversations Between a Baptist and a Seceder." In 1766 McClean wrote *Letters Addressed to Mr. John Glas on the Subject of Baptism*, which set forth Baptist positions, especially on believers' baptism.

Influenced by the Glasite view of faith, McClean asserted that "the word '*pistis*', faith or belief, is evidently used by the inspired writers in the same sense in which it is commonly used or understood."²⁰ Like the Glasites, McClean believed that a plurality of elders was necessary for the New Testament order. Generally speaking, Scotch Baptists also repudiated the idea of a trained ministry. In 1810 the churches split over the issue of whether the Lord's Supper could be properly observed if an elder were not present. Apparently, this is still an unresolved issue among some Baptists in Scotland.

Suffice it to say, Baptists in Scotland have been influenced by the teachings of John Glas and Robert Sandeman. I think it is also fair to say that the Disciples have also been influenced by Glas, Sandeman, and the Scotch Baptists. In fact, Stewart Lewis presents several arguments for a direct connection between the Scotch Baptists and the Disciples in the Maritime provinces of Canada. While these Canadian churches practice open communion (unlike the Scotch Baptists), Lewis says that it is quite common to hear comments from the table that imply that the Lord's Supper is only open to members of "our" churches. A few of the

churches, he notes, have a low view of a professional ordained ministry. Maritime Christian Churches are also anti-society and anti-association and look askance at parachurch organizations. Lewis also sees that a spirit of exclusiveness pervades many of the congregations. To be sure, none of these practices are exclusive to the Maritimes, for such attitudes can be found in the United States as well. The point that Lewis makes is that our movement in general has been influenced by the Scotch Baptists, and the Disciple churches of the Maritimes have probably felt this influence more directly because of their cultural link with Scotland.²¹

The connection between the Disciples and the Scotch Baptists is not a new one. Alexander Campbell himself was often accused of being influenced by the Sandemanians and the Scotch Baptists. Obvious similarities in the two movements along with the fact that Campbell was a Scotsman made this inevitable. Campbell often denied undue influence from these Scottish reformers, though he recognized his debt to them in the same way that he was indebted to Luther and Calvin.²² Perhaps the greatest impact that Sandeman had on Disciple thought was his view of faith, mentioned previously. Of course, Campbell might say that the reason they had similar beliefs was because they were reading the same material, that is, the Bible. Nevertheless, the rejection of religious creeds, the abhorrence of ecclesiastical titles, the weekly communion, the use of the name "Church of Christ," and the desire to return to Christian origins seem too obvious to be coincidental.

Another Scotsman who is credited with laying the foundations for the American Restoration Movement was Walter Scott. Whereas Campbell was the intellectual force behind the movement, Scott was the practical force. Were it not for Scott, the movement would never have gained so many converts in those early years.

Immigrating to this country in 1818 and finding employment in the academy of George Forrester in Pittsburgh, Scott was thrust into the forefront of leadership rather suddenly. Convinced that Forrester's Baptist church taught the truth concerning baptism, Scott submitted to the ordinance and became a member. Not long after this, Forrester drowned and Walter Scott inherited the leadership of both the academy and the church.

About this same time, Scott came across a tract entitled "On Baptism" written by a certain Henry Errett (the father of Isaac Errett), a Scotch Baptist in New York. The tract taught that baptism was "for the remission of sins."²³

Scott decided to visit New York and see what he could learn from these fellow Baptists. However, his visit with them was disappointing, as he found the congregation to be somewhat contentious in nature. Nevertheless, they were saying something about baptism that Scott had already concluded from his study of the Greek New Testament. It was from this church that our movement sprang in New York state.

By 1821 Scott was convinced that the central tenet of Christianity was "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Since George Forrester had been influenced by Sandeman, it is likely that Scott was indirectly influenced by these Scottish reformers also. It was about this time that he met Alexander Campbell. Being like-minded on religious matters, Scott and Campbell forged an alliance that would pave the way for spreading the message of New Testament Christianity in Western Pennsylvania and beyond.

When, in 1823, Campbell proposed a journal entitled *The Christian*, it was Scott who convinced him that the name *Baptist* should be added to it, hence the beginning of the publication of *The Christian Baptist*. This was appropriate, thought Scott, since their work was primarily among the Baptists. Interestingly enough, when Scott moved to nearby Ohio in 1826, he was instrumental in founding three churches. One was of the Haldanean²⁴ persuasion, another was like the Stoneite Christian Church in Kentucky, and another was related to the Campbell movement and a part of the Mahoning Baptist Association.²⁵ This, I believe, shows that there were many similarities between these separate (but related) movements.

Scott was later appointed evangelist for the Mahoning Baptist Association, and this became the catalyst for spreading the teachings of the movement, many of which were impacted by previous contact with the Glasites, Sandemanians, and Scotch Baptists. Straying from the current Calvinistic belief of a direct operation of the Holy Spirit upon the unconverted, Scott simply preached the gospel and invited sinners to respond. In his report to the Association in 1828 he stated:

To persuade men to act upon the divine testimony, rather than to wait upon uncertain and remote influences; to accept disciples upon a simple confession of repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and to baptize them for an immediate personal acquittal from their sins through the blood of Christ, and for the Holy Spirit, are matters which have caused great public excitement. This

excitement, however, has only turned out to the furtherance of the gospel. . . .²⁶

The dissolution of the Mahoning Baptist Association in 1830 (which was opposed by Campbell) was the beginning of the end for ongoing relationships between the Reformers (Disciples) and Baptists. Subsequent attempts to heal the wounds have been unsuccessful. Continuing divisions in both the Baptist ranks as well as in the Disciple movement make any kind of organic union nearly impossible.

Today, the Baptists in Scotland recognize that they have been influenced by the earlier Scotch Baptists, but they have moved away from many of their beliefs. A trained ministry is preferred, and generally there is one pastor for a church. Probably the only significant practice retained from the earlier Scotch Baptists is the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper. Some of the original Scotch Baptist congregations eventually became Churches of Christ (Disciples) in Great Britain.²⁷

I think it fair to say that this is the one practice among Disciples today that puts us in a close historical connection with the Scotch Baptists. True enough, churches in our movement retain the concept of a plurality of elders, but not in the same sense as that of the Scotch Baptists, or even as in the early days of our movement. Most congregations (in whatever segment of the movement they may find themselves) have a professional vocational church leader (pastor, minister, evangelist) directing the day-to-day affairs of the local church.

Historically speaking, there are churches in our movement today in Pennsylvania, Kentucky, New York, and Canada that either were originally Scotch Baptist congregations or were founded by individuals who had been Scotch Baptists.²⁸

While a movement like ours has been influenced by many forces, the Scotch Baptist influence—and those who influenced them—has been significant. This being the case, let us continue to study our historical roots so as to understand more completely and appreciate more fully those factors that produced the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ in North America and elsewhere.

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Notes

¹ J. Gordon Melton, ed., *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1993), 102–3.

² The use of the term “Disciple” in this paper will refer to all heirs of the nineteenth-century reformation, or what is commonly known today as the “Restoration Movement.”

³ Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker, *Journey in Faith* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1975), 89–103.

⁴ Max Ward Randall, *The Great Awakenings and the Restoration Movement* (Joplin: College Press, 1983), 138.

⁵ Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (Joplin: College Press, 1981), 49.

⁶ Winfred E. Garrison and Alfred T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ, A History* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1948), 47.

⁷ Williston Walker, “The Sandemanians of New England,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* 1(1901): 136.

⁸ Garrison and DeGroot, 47.

⁹ A. C. Watters, *History of British Churches of Christ* (Greenfield: Mitchell, 1948), 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹ Walker, 144.

¹² D. W. Bebbington, *The Baptists in Scotland: A History* (Glasgow: Baptist Union, 1988), 14–17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴ McAllister and Tucker, 139–41.

¹⁵ Garrison and DeGroot, 49–50.

¹⁶ D. B. Murray, “Baptists in Scotland before 1869,” *Baptist*

Quarterly 22 (April 1970): 264.

¹⁷ Watters, 12.

¹⁸ George Yuille, *History of the Baptists in Scotland from Pre-Reformation Times* (Glasgow: Baptist Union, n.d.), 45.

¹⁹ David Oliphant, “The Old Scotch Baptists,” *The Banner of Faith* 13 (July-August 1859): 160; quoted in Stewart J. Lewis, “The Scotch Baptist Influence on the Christian Churches of the Maritimes” (M.A. thesis, Cincinnati Christian Seminary, 1984), 36.

²⁰ Bebbington, 21–2.

²¹ Lewis, 211–24.

²² Alexander Campbell, “Reply,” *Christian Baptist* 3 (1827): 182.

²³ This tract was reprinted in Scott’s *The Evangelist* in Volume 6 (1838): 283–6.

²⁴ Robert and James Haldane left the Church of Scotland in 1799 and became Independents. In 1808 they rejected infant baptism and became Baptists. In some works the term “Haldanean” seems to be used interchangeably with “Scotch Baptist.” I was not able to determine what, if any, differences there were between them. One source stated that Haldanean churches had a stated pastor as opposed to a plurality as was customary in Scotch Baptist churches.

²⁵ James DeForest Murch, *Christians Only* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1962), 100.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁷ Bebbington, 39.

²⁸ Murch, 98, 109, 126, 154, 323, 324, 329.