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Bicentennials & What They Teach: Reviewing the Influence of Walter Scott

By Charles R. Gresham

During the last twenty-five years of the twentieth century, Americans have been besieged by bicentennials. In 1976 we celebrated the bicentennial of our national existence (although one wonders why it should be dated from the writing and acceptance of the Declaration of Independence, rather than the ratification of the United States Constitution). In 1992, Kentuckians celebrated the bicentennial of the Commonwealth's existence as a separate entity joined to the other thirteen former colonies, now states. In 1996, Tennessee celebrated the bicentennial of its becoming a part of the United States.

Bicentennials are *memorials*; like all good memorials, they call us back to "beginnings" and to the basic principles held by the leaders (and followers) of those beginnings. One would hope that those who celebrate the bicentennial of a nation, commonwealth, or state will not have waited until the bicentennial to consider and give support to those early principles. Nor should such people have forgotten the history out of which the bicentennial celebration has come.

Bicentennials of other events or lives have also been important in the minds of those who are heirs of the Restoration. In 1988, we remembered the bicentennial of Alexander Campbell's birth. We look back to the centennial gathering at Pittsburgh in 1909, and forward to the bicentennial of the American Movement's beginning in 2009 (why the time period is dated from the publication of the *Declaration and Address*, 1809, rather than *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, 1804,

can be argued by the historians). Bicentennials help us to focus upon the past; but more, to focus upon how the past influences the present and the future.

Centennials and bicentennials also help us get a better perspective on history, particularly our own history. What Dwight Stevenson wrote in the *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, April 1990, on "Writing Centennial History" is true. Any era of time,

once its day is done, is not really dead and buried. It is still "alive and kicking." The past enters into the present not merely as memory but also as a more or less hidden force. . . . Or, more accurately, past events live on in us in the present; they live within us whether we are aware of them or not, and they help shape us and make us what we are. Whether we know a line of written history or not, our yesterdays are within as continuing dynamic forces. (48–49)

Stevenson adds that, in addition to what he has written, he also believes that

a knowledge of one's history is immensely fruitful in suggesting options for a creative advance into the future. We look back through a rear-view mirror, as it were, to get our bearings while driving on straight ahead. . . . Or, to change the figure from that of vision to that of spoken language, when we engage the past in dialogue, there is al-

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ways the exciting possibility that in living encounter with our spiritual ancestors we will discover something entirely new, something that could not have happened if the past had remained mute. (49)

Scott's Life and Career

With this understanding of centennials, bicentennials, and history in general, we come to look at the bicentennial of Walter Scott's birth.¹ Walter Scott was born October 31, 1796, in the town of Moffatt, county Dumfriesshire, Scotland. His parents were devout members of the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian), and his father made a living as a music teacher. Walter was the fourth son and sixth child of a brood of five sons and five daughters. As a child growing up in this happy environment, he displayed both brilliance and reverence, leading his parents to commit him to the Presbyterian ministry. Toward that end, they scraped and saved so that he could be educated at the University of Edinburgh. He entered that university in 1810 at the age of fourteen.

His name was not unfamiliar in Edinburgh. His kinsman Walter Scott, the great novelist, had studied there some twenty years before and lived in the city.² After finishing the Classical course (the usual way to train for ministry), a message came from his mother's brother, George Jones, who served in the U.S. Customs Service, suggesting that one of her boys should be sent to America to receive George's help in his advancement. Walter was chosen, and he arrived safely on "The Glenthorn" in New York's harbor July 7, 1818.³

Walter stayed with his uncle and taught school on Long Island for several months. But the West beckoned, and he moved to Pittsburgh in 1819, securing an associate teaching position with George Forrester, who not only conducted an academy but was also the preacher of a Haldanian Church. Walter was soon studying scripture carefully to "see if these things were so."⁴ He was convinced, was immersed, and became a leader in that local church.

In 1820, George Forrester drowned while swimming in the Allegheny River, leaving both church and academy in the capable hands of his young associate. Scott became

more and more involved in the Reform of Churches as he immersed himself in the work, utilizing the rather extensive library of his late mentor.⁵

Sometime in 1821 a pamphlet, "On Baptism," written by Henry Errett, an elder in a Scotch Baptist Church in New York (and father of Isaac Errett who later became a significant leader in the Movement), came into his hands.⁶ Closing down the academy, he returned to New York City to visit Errett's congregation. The result was a sad disappointment, for he found that the practices of the church were legalistic and well behind the reforms in the Haldanian Church at Pittsburgh.⁷ He remained in the East only a few short months, returning to Pittsburgh (at the urging of Nathaniel Richardson, wealthy Episcopalian who wished Scott to tutor his son, Robert) by way of Paterson, New Jersey; Baltimore, Maryland; and Washington, D.C., where he visited other independent Scotch Baptist churches which, like the New York congregation, were so "sunk in the mire of Calvinism, that they refused to reform."⁸

It was in the Richardson home that Walter Scott first met Alexander Campbell. Thomas, Alexander's father, had taught in the Pittsburgh area, and the Campbell and Richardson families became friends. In the winter of 1821/22 the Campbells, father and son, were visiting in the Richardson home while Walter Scott was there as Robert Richardson's tutor. Scott and the younger Campbell became fast friends and associates in Reform. It was probably at Scott's insistence that Campbell added "Baptist" to "Christian" as the name of his first paper. Scott contributed a number of essays to that journal in those first years.⁹

Scott married Sara Whitsette in 1823 and they continued to labor in Pittsburgh, both at the church and in teaching (the home tutoring had been expanded to an academy). In the summer of 1826, the family moved to Steubenville, Ohio, where Scott began ministering to a Haldanian Church. That same summer he was asked to accompany his friend Alexander Campbell to the annual meeting of the Mahoning Association of Baptist Churches (most all of them had become "Reforming Baptist" churches through the influence of Mr. Campbell), meeting at Canfield, Ohio. That year the Association had sixteen churches, reporting a membership of 578. A total of eighteen baptisms and six other additions were reported, with thirteen dismissals, twelve others "excluded," and eleven deaths.¹⁰ Numerically, the churches were not growing, but declining.

Though not a member of any one of the associated congregations, Walter Scott was asked to preach on the Lord's Day. He did so in such a manner that many who

heard him (one being A. S. Hayden as a young man) remarked on its beneficial impact.¹¹

The next year Scott had determined to add to his labors that of editor of a new journal. A prospectus was prepared and the project was announced in *The Christian Baptist* issue of June 4, 1827. The paper was to be entitled *The Millennial Herald*,¹² but it never saw the light of day because Scott was too involved in a great evangelistic campaign in the Western Reserve among the Mahoning Association churches. Scott had been invited to attend the Mahoning Association meeting at New Lisbon, Ohio, August 23–25, 1827. The major item of business was the possibility of developing some plan to increase the evangelistic effectiveness of the Churches. It was suggested (by A. Campbell) that Walter Scott be employed to “labor among the churches.”

At age thirty-one, Scott began the greatest work of his life, setting into motion a pattern for New Testament evangelism drawn from the New Testament Scriptures themselves. Some five years later, Scott will write of this: “I immediately cut all other connections, abandoned my projected Editorship, dissolved my academy; left my church, left my family, dropped the bitterest tear over my infant household that ever escaped from my eyes, and set out under the simple conduct of Jesus Christ to make an experiment of what is now styled the Ancient Gospel.”¹³

The next three years involved Scott in constant preaching of the centrality of Jesus and in presenting to his hearers on the Western Reserve the proper response to the Gospel that was as old as the New Testament. Undoubtedly, Scott was aided in his understanding by essays he had read in *The Christian Baptist* and by Alexander Campbell’s theoretical insistence in the McCalla debate that “baptism is for the remission of sins.”¹⁴ He was also helped by conversations he had with preachers in the area.¹⁵

In October of 1827 he preached the Ancient Gospel somewhere outside the bounds of the Association and failed, but on November 18, 1827, in New Lisbon, Ohio, he received his first convert, William Amend.¹⁶ Following the example of Peter and the early Christian preachers, he stressed those responses to the Gospel seen in the book of Acts. With his analytical ability, he set forth the Gospel as “facts to be believed; commands to be obeyed; and promises to be enjoyed.” He even developed the response to the Gospel as a “five finger exercise”—faith, repentance, immersion, remission of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This new approach (or old approach, Scott would have said) swept the field like wildfire, and soon Christian Church

preachers—Joseph Gaston, J. Merritt, and John Secrist—began preaching the Ancient Gospel in the same manner.¹⁷

At the August, 1828 meeting of the Mahoning Association, the new *The Evangelist* reported that he had been instrumental in baptizing over one thousand persons during the previous year. For the next three years similar reports were given, and a total of three thousand converts was directly attributable to Scott’s common sense, biblical preaching. Complete churches came over to adopting the Restoration position, now seen as viable, with a means of New Testament outreach and with the identification and assurance that the recovery of biblical baptism provided. New churches were established upon this New Testament plan.¹⁸

But opposition also mushroomed, and Scott became the storm center. Along with the joys of hundreds of converts¹⁹ were the hurts of scores of detractors. Scott’s health wavered; the “burnout” (as we call it now) had taken its toll. He and his family moved from Canfield, Ohio, to Pittsburgh and finally to Cincinnati and Carthage, Ohio. At Carthage, in addition to preaching regularly, he began editing *The Evangelist*. For the next twelve years he edited this journal; ministered to the church at Carthage; wrote a major volume, *The Gospel Restored* (offered in lieu of *The Evangelist* for the year 1836); and served as pro-tem president of Bacon College in Georgetown, Kentucky. He delivered an inaugural address, “The United States System,” for the College, yet was associated with the new college for only a year; D. S. Burnett succeeded him as president in December, 1837.

Scott continued to edit and publish *The Evangelist* from Carthage until 1844. At that time he and his family returned to Pittsburgh where, in addition to preaching for churches, he joined Robert Forrester in editing *The Protestant Unionist*. When his first wife died, he returned to Cincinnati, merging *The Protestant Unionist* with J. T. Melich’s *The Christian Age* to form *The Christian Age and Protestant Unionist*. He and Melich co-edited the journal for a year.

That was his last effort at editing papers. He did publish more books, however, with *To Themelion: The Union of Christians* and *He Nekrosis, or The Death of Christ*, published in 1852 and 1853. His final book, *The Messiahship or Great Demonstration*, was published in 1859.

When Walter Scott died in 1861, he was a broken man. He had buried two wives: Sarah Whitsette (who died in April, 1849), wife of his young adulthood and mother of

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six of his children; and Nannie Allen (who died of consumption in November, 1854, less than four years after their marriage), mother of his daughter Carrie Allen. Depression seized him; his attempts to found an orphan boys’ home and school to parallel the flourishing female institution at Midway, Kentucky, had to be given up. He returned to Mays Lick, Kentucky, where, looking for consolation, he married a wealthy widow, Eliza Sandridge. Though this marriage brought Scott into comfortable financial circumstances, it was otherwise a disastrous alliance. Eliza had grown up in the Mays Lick Church and had known Scott for years as friend and preacher. The marriage ought to have been congenial but it was not, because even though she knew him, she never really understood him. Stevenson undoubtedly points to the problem: “Eliza, as one who had lived all her days in the surrounding of opulence, had a strong respect for possessions; Walter had no conception of such a life, and if he had understood it he would have had contempt for it. Money was to use, or even better, to give away;²⁰ and life was something very much more precious than the finest fortune. Wherever money was concerned, he was impractical and prodigal. His financial indiscretion irritated his wife. Eliza was goaded beyond endurance, and her exasperation blinded her to the poetic firmness and spiritual saintliness of her impractical husband.”²¹

Scott continued to preach, not only at Mays Lick, but at National Conventions and in evangelistic meetings in the area around Mays Lick. He was also busily writing his most ambitious work, *The Messiahship or Great Demonstration*, which closely reasoned his understanding of the centrality of Jesus as Messiah (“The Golden Oracle,” he called it) within the New Testament.

But the rumblings of Civil War were heard as Scott was involved in both itinerant preaching and careful writing. His deep concern for his adopted country (on the brink of dissolution), his unhappy marriage and, perhaps, his feelings of being forgotten and left behind by a movement of religious people conspired to bring him to a state of malaise and sadness. For two years (1860–61) he stayed at

home, even refusing communion (“What could communion mean when Christian brothers were refusing to be bound into one body within the nation?”).²² The “disease of the soul was a broken heart”²³ over the terrible calamity that had come to the nation. He became physically ill with typhoid pneumonia and died Tuesday, April 23, 1861.

His friend through the years (in spite of occasional slights and the eruption of some controversy), Alexander Campbell, wrote: “I knew him well. I knew him long. I loved him much. We might not, indeed, agree in every opinion nor in every point of expediency. But we never loved each other less, because we did not acquiesce in every opinion, and in every measure. By the eye of faith and the eye of hope, methinks I see him in Abraham’s bosom.”²⁴

Walter Scott’s Contributions

Though I am sure Walter Scott felt that his contribution went unrecognized in his own declining years, the verdict of history has proved him wrong. It is to Walter Scott that a grateful movement owes its inception. Dean E. Walker may well have seen the “six springs” whose confluence became the Restoration Movement,²⁵ but it was his mentor, F. D. Kershner, who saw Walter Scott as the genius whose work really began that movement. He wrote:

The Campbells, Stone, and their contemporaries were the pioneers who set in motion the great tide of the Restoration. It was left to Walter Scott, however, to completely and adequately formulate the principle of the movement. In his introductory sermon, on the Ohio Western Reserve, which marked the beginning of the first great evangelistic campaign of our brotherhood, he definitely outlined the Restoration plea for the first time in all its practical details. This outline has never been surpassed or improved upon. It states the whole case for New Testament Christianity, and states it so clearly that there is nothing more to be said. For this reason it is fair to regard Walter Scott as the man who finally launched the Restoration plea upon its successful career.²⁶

But Scott also contributed to the movement its general understanding of evangelism and the role of baptism in the process of conversion. Others had come to see the scriptural truth that baptism was for the remission of sins.²⁷ Others may even have seen this as the long-forgotten “keystone of the arch,”²⁸ but it is to Scott and the campaign

upon the Western Reserve that we must give credit for a consistent application of all these elements and a recovery of the Ancient Gospel, or the sane New Testament approach to evangelism. Campbell and Scott may have quarreled over whether the Ancient Gospel was ever lost and needed discovery,²⁹ but it is to Scott that we are indebted for recovering that dynamic that indeed put the “move” into the movement. His recovery of the Ancient Gospel, Alexander Campbell’s recovery of the Ancient Order, Thomas Campbell’s emphasis upon the Ancient Authority (the New Testament Scriptures), and Barton Stone’s lifelong emphasis upon the Ancient Passion (unity in Christ) could now be combined into a powerful rationale and dynamic for the good of a divided Church. It is no coincidence that the time that this “keystone of the arch” was being seen and used (the early 1830s) was the same time the Reformers (represented by A. Campbell and Scott) and the Christians (represented by Barton Stone) were merging and uniting in a “grass roots” union that showed how practical this adventure for Christian unity could be.

Perhaps the greatest contribution that Walter Scott made to a beginning movement was an emphasis, not upon “five-finger exercises” or a careful analysis of what the Gospel was (“facts to be believed; commands to be obeyed; promises to be enjoyed”), but upon the centrality of Jesus

as the Messiah in God’s great scheme of redemption. In those two major books—*The Gospel Restored* and *The Messiahship or Great Demonstration*—again and again, Walter Scott emphasized this. Listen to him: “The Messiahship when restored to its original *status* forms the centripetal force of our religion. . . .”³⁰ Again: “Finally, the truth of the Messiahship in its grand points—Christ’s death, burial and resurrection—is perpetuated by the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper—the Lord’s Day—the assembling of the brotherhood—the acknowledged memorials of these facts.”³¹

One did not preach “baptism for remission of sins,” but Jesus as the Messiah. The “golden oracle,” which occupied the central focus of Scott’s thought, was “Jesus is the Messiah.” Everything else revolved around and grew out of this great truth, which, Scott believed, was the central truth of Revelation.

We owe much to Walter Scott. This bicentennial of his birth allows us to remember his contributions and, above all, to remember from whence “we” have come in our search for and commitment to the unity that Christ desired his church to possess.

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NOTES

¹It is no mere coincidence that the same Dwight Stevenson who wrote so eloquently about how history functions had himself provided one of the best historical studies (biographies, if you please) of Walter Scott under the title *The Voice of the Golden Oracle*. This volume was originally published by the Christian Board of Publications, St. Louis, in 1946 and later reprinted by College Press of Joplin, Missouri.

²See Stevenson, 29.

³*Ibid.*, 22.

⁴Acts 17:11.

⁵See Walter Scott’s comments in *The Messiahship or Great Demonstration* as noted by Allen A. Gerrard II, *Walter Scott: American Frontier Evangelist* (Joplin: College Press, 1992), 21–22.

⁶According to Stevenson (38), this same pamphlet had come to Alexander Campbell’s attention a few weeks before Campbell’s and Scott’s first meeting.

⁷See William Baxter, *Life of Elder Walter Scott* (Cincinnati: Bosworth, Chase & Hall, 1874), 53–54.

⁸Scott’s words; see Baxter, 55.

⁹See Gerrard, 23.

¹⁰Minutes of the Mahoning Baptist Association, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio. Quoted by Stevenson, 48. These minutes reflect the influence of Campbell; see Stevenson, 50ff.

¹¹See Baxter, 82.

¹²One wonders if there is not some significance in Campbell’s second invitation to the annual meeting of the Association where Scott, at Campbell’s instruction, was chosen as evangelist and this prior proposal was soon forgotten.

¹³*The Evangelist* 1 (1832): 94; quoted by Stevenson, 58.

¹⁴*Campbell–McCalla Debate*, Old Paths Book Club edition (1948), 100.

¹⁵For example, Jacob Osborne of Braceville, Adamson Bentley and, perhaps, some Christian Church preachers (Stone Movement). See Stevenson, 59–62. See also Dean Mills, *Union on the King’s Highway: The Campbell–Stone Heritage of Unity* (Joplin: College Press, 1987), 74ff.

¹⁶See Stevenson’s treatment of this significant event (66–69). Also, Gerrard’s (30ff.). Both reflect Baxter, 103ff.

¹⁷See Stevenson, 74–75.

¹⁸See Stevenson, 98ff.

¹⁹One of the important converts was Robert Richardson, Scott's former pupil, who had ridden from Pittsburgh where he was practicing medicine to be baptized by Scott. This happened at Shalersville, Ohio. See Stevenson, 108–9.

²⁰There are many anecdotes about Scott's largess whenever he had funds, sometimes even giving away all that he had or gifts given to him by others.

²¹Stevenson, 211–12.

²²Ibid., 220.

²³Ibid., 222.

²⁴*The Millennial Harbinger* (1861): 298.

²⁵See his *Adventuring for Christian Unity* (Birmingham: Berean Press, 1935), 3ff.

²⁶*The Restoration Handbook*, Series 1 (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, 1918), 26.

²⁷Campbell had stated this truth and used it against McCalla in their debate in 1823 (see previous footnote).

²⁸B. F. Hall, as quoted by Samuel Rogers, *Autobiography of Elder Samuel Rogers* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1909), 57. Rogers also refers to Stone's toying with this position much earlier, and he records that a Wentworth Roberts, perhaps as early as 1821, sought baptism for remission at his hands. Ibid., 54ff.

²⁹As they did in the pages of *The Evangelist* and *The Millennial Harbinger* (see the story in Stevenson, 180ff).

³⁰Messiahship, 264.

³¹Ibid., 264–65.