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# A THEOLOGY FOR A NEW CENTURY

By Thomas H. Olbricht

At the end of the twentieth century a new mood has arrived. According to some, modernity is now history, and we are breaking surface onto a new post-modern era. The harbingers of this new temperament are suspicious of all ontologies or foundationalism. The new age is pluralistic. Universals no longer obtain, nor should they. At one time the United States was Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. Now ethnicity prevails, and Islamic and Asian religions have large clienteles. The appropriate reaction to this strange new world, so it is averred, is an acquiescence. We must put behind the universalistic aspirations of the Enlightenment and Modernism.

We must accept the fact humankind no longer has one story of its past and future, and in fact, never did have. In the dawning epoch we cannot presume the privilege of telling our story. We must create it. To earn that entitlement we must aggressively create a climate in which every one, not just us, is free to tell her or his story. Revisionism, if not deconstruction, is therefore in order. To enter the new century triumphantly, a revised, if not new theology, is demanded. We in the Churches of Christ must forgo certain aspects of cherished restorationism in order to achieve a viable identity and thereby survive.

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I am not out of sorts with the realities of the post-modernist assessment. I mainly quarrel with the halting, foundationless grounds on which the oncoming generation seeks to erect a new structure on the ruins of modernity. The only alternative, it is true, is to tell our story, but that story, so I affirm, is the old, old story, of Jesus and his love, which constitutes the eye of the storm, the heart of the biblical faith. I do not claim that the cautious new world is clamoring for the old, old story. This story is no longer privileged as it has been for eighteen centuries. It must create an audience anew. But such a fate is no ground for despair. The story lacked credentials in second century Mediterranean culture, but soon ascended through the telling, casting a new civilization.

## Our Past Theology

Our two-hundred-year-old restoration theology indeed faces an uncertain future. It was hammered out in the world of the Enlightenment which presupposed that reality is located in external structures and discrete entities. It sought an empirical, this-worldly reality to center upon—the visible church and overt steps to salvation.

Restorationist theology owes more to the reform theology of Calvin and Zwingli than to that of Luther because it is Scripture and church centered. Calvin rejected the Christocentric, arguing that “. . . scripture itself is the authority for Christian belief rather than any Christocentric interpretation of scripture.”<sup>1</sup> More specifically, however, Churches of Christ theology resounds with echoes of Zwingli

(1484-1531) who,

... had the same basic aim as Luther, but highlighted the purification of the Church by the proclamation of the Word of God which involved necessarily not merely the revivification of its faith and reconstruction of its doctrine, but the overhauling of every department of ecclesiastical life and practice.<sup>2</sup>

This connection, though not direct, is not accidental. One can mention first the influence of Zwingli on John Knox and Scottish Presbyterianism, and thus the Campbells who came from Scottish Presbyterian backgrounds.

The connection between the Zwinglian reform and the British scene may be specifically documented. Various English exiles in the time of Mary Tudor (Queen 1553-12558) made their way to Zurich. Already some influence from the Swiss reformation had occurred through the correspondence of English church leaders with Johann Heinrich Bullinger (1505-1575) who succeeded Zwingli as chief pastor of Zurich. Somewhat later because of opposition, Martin Bucer (1491-1551), the successor to Zwingli as leader of the Swiss reform, made his way to Cambridge (1549) where he was appointed Regius professor of divinity.<sup>3</sup> The Zwinglian program especially impressed those of Puritan sentiments. According to Ahlstrom, in respect to the Puritans,

From the outset these reformers were determined to achieve a three-fold program for purifying the visible church: through a purging of popish remnants and the establishment of "apostolic" principles of worship and church order, through the implantation and teaching of Reformed doctrine, and through a revival of discipline and evangelical piety in clergy and laity alike.<sup>4</sup>

They demanded explicit scriptural warrant for all such matters, regarding whatever was without as idolatrous, popish and superstitious. The Puritans championed plain preaching and heralded simplicity of proclamation and life.

While the Campbells and other early restoration leaders had no direct ties to Puritanism, they were heirs of many of its principles.<sup>5</sup> The Campbell movement grew rapidly in a country founded on Puritan principles. But in America there was a difference. In America by Campbell's time, no state church existed (or at least soon disappeared) to rally against. Now multiple churches were visible on the scene. The Campbells championed one church over against multiple churches. The question therefore became the parameters of this one church. The

solution was to reject all creeds and rebuild the Church of Jesus Christ, plank by plank, from the Oracles of God, the Scriptures, especially the New Testament.<sup>6</sup> The America of the Campbells was specifically one in which the denominations were organizing and testing their wings. Jon Butler in a recent book has argued against a consensus of some

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decades, that the important influence on Christianity in America between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars was the Second Great Awakening. He insists instead that the emergence of the denominations is the paramount factor.<sup>7</sup>

One of the reasons the restoration centered upon the overt characteristics of the church was that Alexander Campbell, especially, but also Tolbert Fanning (1810-1874), David Lipscomb, as well as those of the "right wing," were all greatly influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment. It was persons with this frame of mind, and there were many in America, who were easily won over to the movement.<sup>8</sup> The Enlightenment emphasis was on the exterior, the solid features of external reality. It focused on external structures and specific entities. It opposed enthusiasm and promoted arm-length, reserved relationships. It spoke little of love and was indeed embarrassed by "gushy" love.

Walter Scott forcefully schematized our two foci theology, indicating first the dispensational, then the plan of salvation which he labeled, "The Ancient Gospel" and conceived it as prior to taking its place along side the "Ancient Order."

ADAM

In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die  
sin its guilt, its power, its punishment.

**MOSES**

Thou shalt have no other God beside me.  
 .....

**JESUS**

Behold my beloved Son, in whom I am well  
 pleased

## Ancient Gospel

Faith, Rep. Bap. Remis. H. Spir. Resu.

1. God, Christ, H.S. Evidence
2. Conversion, Reconciliation
3. Remis. Obed. Regen. wash. etc.
4. Pardon, N. Cov. Justi. Adop. Sal.
5. Sanctification, Illum., etc.
6. Judgment, Eter. Life, Punish.

## Ancient Order

Gvt., Wor. Ord. Duis. Man. & Cus Lit.

1. Officers, Treasury, & etc.
2. Pray, Sing, Read, Ex., Teac. Preach
3. Bapt. Lord's Supper, Collection
4. Private, Pub. & Mixed off. Exam
5. Hosp. H. Kiss, S. Hands, Emb. Wash Ft.
6. Old & New Testament, etc.<sup>9</sup>

These two basic foci have been our theological agenda from Campbell and Scott even to the present. We have had a theology which has focused on ecclesiology and soteriology (with emphasis, all too often, on man's acceptance rather than God's salvific action).

We have had perspectives on the old classical theological topics, but ordered differently. In terms of the rhetorical ordering of our theological topics we have assigned the following:

- (1) The unity of the church
- (2) Scripture
- (3) Hermeneutics
- (4) The Church: The Ancient Order
- (5) Digression: Innovation and Disfellowship
- (6) The Ancient Gospel
- (7) Jesus Christ
- (8) God: Creator and Provider
- (9) The Holy Spirit: Inspirer of the Scripture
- (10) Man: Sinner and Struggler
- (11) Worship: Preaching and Complying
- (12) The Judgment: Accounting and Separating

The rhetorical priority of unity has eroded in the last thirty years. We have focused upon the church as the kingdom of God upon earth and the means of

entry into it. The hermeneutic in demand was one which refereed specific church practices so as to ascertain beyond any shadow of doubt which ones lived up to the requirements of the New Testament. Matters of the doctrine of God, the Trinity, perspectives on the atonement and Christology, while discussed early in the movement, were pushed aside

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as traditionally too metaphysical and theological.

**New Testament Theology**

To date we in the Churches of Christ have told a story which related rhetorically to the American situation and incorporated the Enlightenment mindset. The analysis, however, of our younger scholars is correct. The American scene has changed. Protestantism, and now likely even Christianity, no longer is the tail that wags the dog. What is the answer? Shall we construct a new rhetorical agenda which appeals to the emerging post-modern agenda? I am not critical of the desire to adapt rhetorically. But what are we to adapt? For me, it is a foundational story. I too reject foundationalism in the sense of philosophical metaphysics. But I embrace without reservation the old, old story, which is foundational in the sense that it is the "faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). It is a beginning point situated in a mighty act of God rather than in a universal ontological proposition.

The early Christians made their way into an indifferent and, sometimes, extremely hostile world through proclaiming the story of Jesus. We have many clues regarding how the story was told through the statements of Paul (for example, I Thessalonians 1:9, 10, I Corinthians 15:1-11), and the so called sermons in Acts. This telling ultimately gets fleshed out in detail in the Gospels, possibly beginning with Mark. An outline, with special indebtedness to Peter's discourse to the household of Cornelius in Acts 10 is:

1. Who he is

2. Preceded by John
3. Anointed by the Holy Spirit
4. Went about doing good
5. Preached the good news
6. Crucified
7. Raised
8. The witnesses
9. The Holy Spirit
10. The church
11. Baptism and the Lord's Supper
12. No partiality
13. The law
14. The return<sup>10</sup>

These topics have a different focus than those of either classical or restoration theology. They focus upon God—on his actions, rather than his essence, or even the results of his actions in the church. Our restorationist topics which are ecclesiological and rhetorically derived therefore tend to get us off on the wrong foot. It is no problem with me that we address the classical or restorationist topics, but we need to assess their relative importance in the light of the telling of the Christ story. Our topics, while misordered, nevertheless provide certain emphases very important in scripture.

### An Assessment

I do not have space here to present a fully fleshed out explication of the old, old story according to the New Testament outline. What I can do, however, is show that by taking the New Testament outline seriously, we begin the story with Jesus himself and follow with a church modeled on a loving, sharing family, rather than an impersonal blueprint.

In one sense, as with the New Testament, Christology has been foundational for Churches of Christ. It is clear for both Campbell and Scott that Christ is the beginning point. But in what sense? He is the beginning point because according to a favorite Churches of Christ text, "Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior" (Ephesians 5:24). He is foundational because his is the rock upon which the church is built (Matthew 16:18). Christ died for the church.

He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:18-20)

Christ is the head of the church, that is, in our conception, its lawgiver. "All authority in heaven

and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). But once it is clear that Christ died for the church and is the lawgiver in it, then Christ is relegated back stage and the church moves up front center. Neither Campbell or Scott concerned themselves much with the word and work of the earthly Jesus. Neither have preachers in the Churches of Christ since. In effect, we have collapsed Christology into ecclesiology. The Gospels, however, and even the earthly Jesus, have been discovered in the churches in the past thirty years, providing impetus for a hermeneutical shift.

A second cause for the theologico-hermeneutical shift has been a revisioning of the church. In the past the model has been monarchical-legal. In the new orientation the family and familial love provide the model as, in fact, for Paul in I Thessalonians. In the monarchical-legal model, as head, lawgiver and savior for the church, Christ is an authorial figure. He is the one imposing upon the church its exterior blueprint. The church is a glorious body because the structural features have been provided by Christ himself. He "gave himself up for her . . . so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:25-27). This statement, I think, focuses upon the believers in the church, not on a monarchical blueprint. Believers are without spot or wrinkle because they have been purified by the death of Christ. In Churches of Christ this text has been advanced as proof that the structural features of the church are perfect because they were set forth by Christ himself. The church in conception and blueprint is perfect because God, through Christ, generated them. Believers, even though washed and forgiven, are nevertheless blemished, so that the church proclaimed is always the perfect plan of God, never the redeemed members, because none of the latter is perfect. In the past thirty years in several quarters, the church is more and more depicted as a family of loving and forgiven people of God. The structural church remains, but its privileged position has receded into the background.

Now that the model for the church as changed from blueprint to the family, Churches of Christ members still retain the shell of the older polity but are not as clear as they once were as to why it is crucial. The elders or other leaders of the church have become more parental types who serve as models for life, rather than as skilled blueprint readers. There is more openness of speak of a warm personal relationship with Christ as older brother in the family. God is now available as a loving father figure. The church possesses a loving father rather

than a harsh judge who spends all his time pouring over the law.

The church did not take first priority in the New Testament. The priority is the Lord of the church. "Because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 9:7). The Gospels precede the Epistles in the New Testament and they cannot be relegated to the Mosaic dispensation as some among us have done. We need to more than mention that Christ is the foundation upon which the church is built. We need to spend much time in the Gospels so that our lives radiate the life of "He who is the head" of the church.

The church is that body which has come about as the result of the body of Christ on the Cross (I Corinthians 11:29). The church is the body that carries on the ministry of the earthly Jesus under his empowerment, "And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it" (Mark 16:20). "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age: (Matthew 28:20). The church is the body that is empowered by the Holy Spirit of the risen Lord. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The church is not a structure, it is a family, the household of God (I Peter 4:17). The church is a body of caring people.

Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more . . . (I Thessalonians 5:11).

The church is enclosed in a structure but is not a structure. It is a body of living, breathing people, loving one another because Christ loved them first.

One may have a perfect setup at a ski slope. First there is the latest in lifts, then a fireplace-lined lodge with outstanding fast food. On the left is the entrance to a one-of-a-kind ski shop where one may purchase any equipment she ever dreamed of owning. On the slopes are eighty-four runs, perfectly groomed and tailored for persons of all ages and all levels of skills. But a perfect setup is not what skiing is about. Skiing is people. It is people out on the slope actually racing down. The church is not first a structure. It is an assembly of redeemed women and men.

### Conclusion

We live in a strange new world, call it post-modern or whatever. We need to respond to these changes. We will undertake a retrenchment and holding action at our own peril. At the same time, in my view, to opt for foundationless theology is to turn one's back on the faith that is in Christ Jesus. We need a fresh assessment of both how biblical is our traditional restorationism and how we may best tell the old, old story in this new milieu. Our story should not be any story, nor too heavily dependent on any mind-set whether Enlightenment, Modern or Post-Modern. It should commence from one foundation. "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid, that foundation is Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 3:11). I need also hasten to add that Jesus must be explicated in the light of the theology of the whole of the Scripture, not just the New Testament, for after all God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We do not fully grasp the fullness of God as the one who struggles with man in history and loves him forever, despite man's willful turning of his back on God, apart from the Old Testament.