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THE NON-SECTARIAN PLEA

In Retrospect And Prospect

By Monroe Hawley

It was in March, 1864, that Moses E. Lard asked in his quarterly, "Have We Not Become a Sect?"¹ Six years later, W. K. Pendleton, editor of the **Millennial Harbinger**, requested three influential brotherhood papers to respond to these questions: (1) "what is sectarianism?" (2) "are we a sect?" and (3) "are there sectarians holding prominent or representative positions among us?"² Only Benjamin Franklin, editor of the **American Christian Review**, responded.

Restoration leaders hotly debated these issues in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Today we still wrestle with them. For those in the restoration heritage these are troubling questions because our movement has opposed sectarianism from its inception.

The Restoration Movement began as an effort to promote Christian unity in a world deeply divided by sectarianism. Because the leaders believed that the many creeds of the day impeded that unity, they called for a return to the Bible as the sole written source of religious authority. In the **Declaration and Address**, the most significant document in the history of the movement, Thomas Campbell decried the status of Christianity at the start of the nineteenth century:

Instead of her catholic constitutional

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unity and purity, what does the Church present us with, at this day, but a catalogue of sects and sectarian systems - each binding its respective party, by the most sacred and solemn engagements, to continue as it is to the end of the world: at least. This is confessedly the case with many of them. What a sorry substitute these are for Christian unity and love!

Leaders of the movement perceived the means of achieving unity to be the restoration of the ancient order, a return to the simple faith of the early Christians. When all people united upon the teachings of the Bible and duplicated the pattern of the early church, there would be unity and the divine body would be non-sectarian. The writings of the pioneers of the movement are replete with condemnation of "the sects" and sectarianism. Obviously a movement that decried the evils of sectarianism would do all it could to be non-sectarian.

Initially the movement was exactly that - a movement cutting across sectarian lines, calling people out of their denominations to be just Christians. they often declared, "While we profess to be Christians only, we do not claim to be the only Christians." As the Campbell movement spread across the western frontier, it picked up steam as similar efforts joined forces with them. Beginning in 1832, the merger of the Campbell "Reformers" and the "Christians," led by Barton W. Stone, seemed to validate the ideal of non-sectarian unity on the restoration basis.

However, it soon became apparent that the

religious world as a whole would not buy the platform, especially when the reformers insisted on immersion for the forgiveness of sins. Doors that had been opened were now closed and the movement was forced to an independent status in which religious neighbors viewed them as just another denomination. It was this status that prompted much soul-searching asking if the movement had become a denomination, and, if so, how could they profess to be undenominational?

It is pertinent at this point to inquire how the restoration leaders defined sectarianism. The Greek word *haireisis* from which our word sect is derived in the New Testament carries the idea of party or faction. It is used six times in Acts where the R. S. V. renders it always has a bad connotation and conveys the idea of the party spirit or factions. The reason the epistles look negatively upon *haireisis* is that the Scriptures picture the church as a unified body which cannot tolerate division. Sectarianism is division. The church must be organically and spiritually united and therefore *haireisis* or sectarianism is wrong.

In the post-apostolic period, however, the definition of *haireisis* shifted. Early in the second century Ignatius attached the meaning of heresy to the word.⁴ That definition persisted in religious circles and was embraced by many of the early leaders of the Restoration Movement, including Alexander Campbell. Campbell believed that when error is taught it leads men to form parties around the false teaching. Thus sectarianism. It is clear that false teaching contributes to sectarianism in the biblical sense of factionalism. But the equation of heresy and sectarianism is not adequate. Campbell never seems to have faced the issue of whether one can be biblically correct and still be sectarian because he is fictional

Barton W. Stone had a different concept of sectarianism. He saw it as the party spirit. As the Reformers and Christians merged their efforts in 1832, Stone was exasperated by the partisanship he saw among those professing to be non-sectarian. Finally, he wrote:

The scriptures will never keep together in union, and fellowship members not in the spirit of the scriptures, which spirit is love, peace, unity, forbearance, and cheerful obedience. This is the spirit of the great Head of the body. I blush for my fellows, who hold up the Bible as the bond of union yet make their opinions of it tests of fellowship: who plead for union of all Christians: yet refuse fellowship with

such as dissent from their notions. Vain men! Their zeal is not according to knowledge, which will declare it. **Such antisectarian-sectarians are doing more mischief to the cause, and advancement of truth, the unity of Christains, and the salvation of the world, than all the skeptics in the world. In fact, they make skeptics.**⁵

Stone was on target in pointing out that a movement committed to the destruction of sectarianism was plagued by the very malady it opposed! The problem was that those displaying the symptoms did not realize they had a problem. Sectarianism is insidious, infecting those who have not the slightest idea that it has taken hold of them.

The diverse views of Campbell and Stone as to what constitutes non-sectarian. Adherents to Campbell's position generally understand that non-sectarian Christianity is measured in terms of correct doctrine. This was the view of Moses Lard who wrote:

It is proper here to remark that it not necessary for a party to be wholly corrupt in order to be a sect. A single false idea is enough, provided this is made the basis on which the party is formed.⁶

A corollary of Lard's position that false teaching results in sectarianism is that to be non-sectarian one must be doctrinally correct. This resulted in a pre-occupation, still apparent today, with rooting out heresy in order to be non-sectarian. In 1837 Arthur Criehtfield founded a paper called **The Heretic Detector and Reformer** specifically devoted to that task.

An examination of the names of periodicals in the Restoration Movement reveals that many of them were designed to expose erroneous teaching, not to build up the faithful. True, false doctrine must be opposed, but when brotherhood watchdogs like Criehtfield control our thinking, a sectarian mentality soon develops.

In conjunction with different restoration views of sectarianism, note should be made of the sociological theory of the development of sects. Early in the twentieth century sociologists began exploring the relationship between religion and social thought. A pioneer in this study was Ernst Troeltsch in **The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches**. Troeltsch sought to identify the process by which dissenting religious bodies grew out of established religion. Others such as Richard Niebuhr refined

the theory which raises many challenging questions for those of us who seek the recovery of authentic

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Christianity. Among the conclusions drawn from this theory is that religious sects derive their identity from their insistence that they have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So long as a body of people is sectarian, its identity is a matter of fact.

If the sociological conclusion equating religious identity with sectarianism is valid (I think in general it is), this poses a major question for those associated with the Restoration Movement. Since those in the movement have long professed to be non-sectarian, is it possible to have an identity while still opposing sectarianism? If it is not, is there any value in making a pretense of being non-sectarian? I believe that it is possible, but, before explaining how, some observations must be made.

Religious identity among any people necessarily relates to doctrine, and there are certain irreducible tenets of our faith that cannot be compromised. John drew a hard line against the gnostics when he declared that those who deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh are the antichrists (1 John 2:18 - 23). Believing that Jesus actually came in the flesh is a vital doctrine in our faith and is one element in our doctrinal identity.

The restoration ideal places a high priority on doctrine in the search for authentic Christianity. A study of the epistles quickly establishes the importance attached to correct teaching in the early church. The problem we all face is determining how much latitude can be allowed in our beliefs if we are to be truly non-sectarian. A common practice of religious sects is to define their teachings very narrowly and by this process exclude all who disagree on specific issues. Identity is found in doctrinal agreement.

The nineteenth century restorationists partially found identity in doctrinal beliefs. Eschewing creeds and denominational organizations, they called for unity on the basis of the Bible alone. While they were in basic agreement with most Protestants, they often chose to emphasize their disagreements. They dissented in two primary areas - the ancient gospel (relating to conversion, especially baptism) and the ancient order (the structures and ordinances of the church, especially weekly observance of the Lord's supper). Unfortunately, some vital teachings, such as holiness and the atonement of Christ, were neglected. It was not that they did not accept these truths: rather they assumed everybody already believed them.

Instead of a goal to be sought, some believed restoration to be an accomplished fact. This seems to have been true of Walter Scott.⁷ Others thought of restoration as a process. There is a dichotomy between restoration seen as a state and restoration viewed as a process. Those who think restoration is a state that has been fully achieved find identity in doctrinal correctness. If one is right in every essential doctrine, he is part of the body of Christ and shares his identity with others who believe as he does. They believe that those who disagree are sectarian because they have espoused heresy. By defining the true church purely on the basis of doctrinal accuracy, they have themselves fitted the mold of sectarianism as sociologically defined, though they profess to be non-sectarian!

On the other hand, those who see restoration as a process by which one continually strives to recover the biblical ideal are faced with a dilemma if they acknowledge that they do not have a corner on the truth. If sectarianism is indeed the source of identity, and they profess to be non-sectarian, how can they find identity in a sectarian world?

The answer to this question is found by defining undenominational Christianity. Biblically speaking, the church and the saved are identical. When one is saved from his sins, he is added to the divine body. The church is the saved! To be truly non-sectarian we must understand that in the biblical sense the church is not defined in terms of "our brotherhood," but is composed of everyone who is a child of God by virtue of obeying the gospel. It includes some we have never heard about and some whom we believe to be in doctrinal error. More than likely it excludes some that we list on our church rolls. Ultimately, only God himself knows those who are his.

In the latter part of the 19th century and early part of the 20th there were several men who tried earnestly to communicate this ideal to their hearers. They included Benjamin Franklin and his son, Jo-

seph, F. G. Allen, F. D. Srygley, M. C. Kurfees, J. N. Armstrong, and G. C. Brewer. Srygley wrote:

My understanding of the New Testament is that all Christians are in the church of God. The same thin that makes one a Christian constitutes him a member of the church. When Christians get into sects, parties, or denominations, they are in something more than the church of God. A Christian who belongs to the Baptist Church, for instance, is in the church of God and the Baptist church both. The idea is to get him out of the Baptist Church and leave him in the church of God.

Though the ideal of undenominational Christianity is very simple, it is hard to communicate because we live in a society attuned to sectarian thinking. We have allowed our religious neighbors to mold our thought patterns. I believe most Christians in congregations associated with the Restoration Movement have not grasped the non-sectarian ideal. Perhaps that is because those who are teaching them have not understood it either.

To return to the question posed earlier, how can we have an identity without becoming sectarian? My response is that identity must be found in Christ in the context of being genuinely non-sectarian. This is what the pioneers of the restoration Movement sought. If one is truly non-sectarian, he is set apart from the sectarian world just as the one who lives the holy life is set apart from others who live sinful lives. Would not the Apostle Paul, were he with us today, proclaim that contemporary sectarianism is just as wrong as it was in first-century Corinth? And would he not call all of us to be just Christians - nothing more and nothing less?

Our plea to be Christians only has a powerful appeal to the world. It is a call to authentic Christianity. That the call has often gone unheeded indicates that we have not always practiced what we preached. If we ask others to be just Christians but exhibit the sectarian spirit, our actions belie our words.

What is involved in practicing non-sectarian Christianity? First, we must truly understand the concept. We must expand our thinking beyond the bounds of brotherhood issues which prescribe the limits of our fellowship. This means that we will recognize as brethren those who have obeyed the same gospel we have, but with whom we differ in doctrinal matters. It does not mean that we endorse their errors or participate with them in things we

conscientiously oppose. We will not disdainfully label them "brothers in error." Though they may be in error, even as all of us sometimes are. We accept them because they have been born into the same spiritual family. They are part of the body of Christ because they have been saved from their sins.

The practice of non-sectarian Christianity also requires that our speech be non-sectarian. Sectarian language reflects our thinking. The use of "church of

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Christ" to the exclusion of other equally biblical terms identifying the family of God is a sectarian symptom. By choosing a single expression to describe the divine body, we convey a sectarian identity to our neighbors which is the very thing we should not do if we wish to be non-sectarian. In using "church of Christ" as a modifier of Christians, schools, and preachers, we not only use poor grammar, but we employ a Bible term unbiblically.

Ultimately, if we seek to be non-sectarian, our identity must be rooted in Christ. The vital question is not, "What congregations do I fellowship?" but "What is my relationship to Christ?" One's relationship with Christ must have precedence over his associations with fellow disciples.

The early Christian teachers saw the person and mission of Jesus as the heart of their faith. They did not just teach facts about Christ, but spoke of him as one with whom they enjoyed a personal relationship. Their message focused on Jesus; everything else was secondary. Paul declared, "When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1,2).

Those with the sectarian spirit rarely focus on Jesus. This is not to say they do not reverence him

or preach about him. Rather, they do not make Jesus their spiritual focal point. An issue-oriented theology often accompanies the sectarian spirit. When one is preoccupied with religious issues, his attention ceases to be riveted on the Lord.

The non-sectarian ideal played a prominent role in the early Restoration Movement. The plea to leave sectarianism to be just Christians motivated thousands to take their stand for undenominational Christianity. Unfortunately, the movement has in many ways turned inward, focusing more on doctri-

nal correctness than on Christ. In the process lip service has been paid to the non-sectarian plea by those who have not understood its meaning.

The future of non-sectarian Christianity depends strictly on those who embrace it. If the problem of sectarianism is rooted in the heart, the solution is found by correcting the thinking to make Jesus preeminent in our faith. When we are aware of our own misunderstandings, we will then **“look to Jesus the pioneer of our faith”** to help him remove our sectarianism.