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Baptism and the Remission of Sins: An Historical Perspective, David W. Fletcher

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Book Reviews

Jack Reese, Editor



The Second Incarnation: A Theology for the 21st Century Church

Rubel Shelly, Randall J. Harris
Howard Publishing Company, 1992

Shelly and Harris have done their readers a great service by articulating in a thoughtful and readable way their thinking on the nature of the church. This book comes at a time when by all counts Churches of Christ are in the midst of an identity crisis, and quite possibly what some are calling a “paradigm shift.” Given Shelly’s prominence as preacher, lecturer, and author, this book takes on added significance. It will doubtless be widely read and much discussed and could prove to be a book of considerable historical significance.

As a collaboration, the book is essentially seamless. The authors write, for the most part, in one voice, though there are times when the preacher (Shelly) can be distinguished from the professor (Harris). The book is greatly enriched by the breadth and variety of secondary sources quoted throughout, and one senses that it is here that the reader owes a great deal to Harris’ training and expertise.

The book is an ecclesiology — a study of the church — offered in a different key from what has previously passed under that heading in the history of our movement. The primary categories of the past do not appear in prominence here. Gone are the familiar headings “The Name of the Church,” “The Founding of the Church,” “The Organization of the

Church,” “The Worship of the Church,” and so on. What Shelly and Harris promise instead is an articulation of the church as the continuation of the ministry of Jesus — a *second incarnation*. The book asks the question “What if Jesus were a church?” It is their hope that this question will provide the theological energy for our tradition to move purposefully into the next century.

While tying ecclesiology to Christology is not an earth shattering breakthrough, it is regrettably a concept that has gone largely unexplored in our movement. Simply by focusing the questions of ecclesiology in this way the authors have provided an invaluable service. The extent, however, to which they pursue this noble enterprise is a bit uneven. Sometimes the Christology that provides the foundation for the ecclesiology is more implicit than explicit. This is not to say that some sections lack a Christological focus altogether, but rather that a more vigorous exploration of the relationship between the person of Jesus and the church could have been achieved.

This lack of Christological exploration could be due to the fact that this is a book of the times. In addition to charting a positive course for the church in relation to Jesus, the authors have the added burden of dismantling to some extent the type of pattern thinking that has produced the traditional questions concerning the church listed above. In fact, this aspect of Shelly and Harris’ work may be the far more significant contribution for many who

read it.

The book is divided into four sections. The first (*A New Doctrine of the Church? Possibilities and Limitations*) clears the underbrush by presenting the church as a dynamic, forward-looking entity that can and must change to meet the challenges of being Christ's presence in a changing world. Using the language of Jesus, they suggest that while the wine is unchanging, the wineskin must always be new to accommodate the ever bubbling nature of the gospel. The section ends by exploring the role of scripture as an anchor for the church. Here they provide what so many have waited to see — an articulation of a hermeneutic.

The second section (*Fundamental Conceptions*) traces three images of the church that the authors see to be central to the biblical witness: the Body of Christ; a Pilgrim Church; and the Fellowship of the Spirit. By emphasizing the body of Christ as the fundamental image of identity for the church the authors suggest a shift must occur in our thinking about the church from "institution to person, pattern to principle, deed to motivation." While all of the material in this section is thoughtful and provoking, new ground may be covered for many readers in the section on the pilgrim church.

As a pilgrim church, God's people never delude themselves into thinking they have arrived. They are always a people on the way. As such, the church is not so much an entity with its eye fixed on the rear view mirror of church history. But it looks forward, confessing its failings, trusting in the mercy of God, and eagerly awaiting its consummation when Jesus returns. This concept requires reorientation for a restoration people. At the very least it suggests that restoration is an ongoing process. Yet, the implications appear to strike even deeper, to the very notion of restoration itself. In what sense is restoration a valid notion in light of the church's identity as a pilgrim people? The reader awaits the authors' answers to this question until the last chapter.

The third section of **The Second Incarnation** deals with what the authors term "Fundamental Relationships." The church relates to God in worship. The church's life is forged through its internal discoveries as it practices compassion, encouragement, and confession. The church relates to the world through service, deliberate acts of justice and mercy, and through prophetic utterance. An entire chapter is related to evangelism.

The last section of the book picks up again many of the concepts raised early and continued through the chapter on the pilgrim church. The section is entitled, "Ecclesiology and Eschatology."

The final chapter asks the burning question of the book. "Does the church discover its identity and find its mission via a backward-looking gaze? Or do we live and function as a forward-looking people?" Their answer to both questions is a qualified "yes." Since the past contains the life of Jesus it has an authoritative hold on the church. The author's also affirm the importance of the Acts and epistles for the ordering of the church's life. Yet, "while rooted in the past, . . . , the church's passion must always be directed toward the future. Christianity which is true to its origins must always be eschatological."

The chapter preceding spells out the importance of baptism and the Lord's Supper as future oriented events. While both find their definition in relation to the past, both constantly urge us to look forward when the work begun in our baptism is complete. This chapter might hold fertile ground for us to consider the notion of restoration given the fundamental notion of the church as a forward looking, pilgrim people. Rooted in the past, yet longing for a future, the church lives out of a fundamental *story*, which by its very nature allows the church to be dynamic and responsive to future challenges and opportunities. This approach is suggested by the authors in the final chapter, but its explicit exploration could shore up some of the ambiguity in the hermeneutic suggested in chapter 2.

In the final analysis the authors give us much to think about. There are certainly places to disagree. There are even more places to stop and think and wish for more instruction from these gifted thinkers. To conceive of the church in the ways they suggest will introduce changes into our congregations. They successfully and gently point out some of the weaknesses of our early pattern thinking and lift our gaze to see a different pattern. They compel us to see the true identity of the church, less in its institutional forms, and more in the character and person of her founder. The implications of this ecclesiology, if diligently pursued, could consume a church's agenda for years to come. Such a church would undoubtedly find God's renewing presence.

Mark Love
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Baptism and the Remission of Sins: An Historical Perspective

edited by David W. Fletcher

Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1990. 432 pp.

Early in both the Stone and Campbell movements baptism forced its way to the center of concern. It has continued to do so throughout the Restoration Movement's history. The view developed by Alexander Campbell, characterized by Richard Tristano as "a *via media* between the evangelical protestant and Roman Catholic" (**The Origins of the Restoration Movement: An Intellectual History**, p. 91), was that a real change of state is effected in the immersion of believing penitents. In the 1830s when John Thomas began teaching that persons immersed by Baptists or others outside the Movement must be baptized, Campbell vehemently opposed him. In the context of that dispute, however, a woman from Lunenburg, Virginia, wrote Campbell asking if only the immersed could be counted as Christians. His answer was no. Campbell's position in these controversies set the stage for the Movement's major baptismal conflicts.

The Thomas position (comparable to the Landmark Baptist position which opposed "alien immersion") was embraced by Austin McGary in the 1880s who promoted it through the **Firm Foundation**. This time the opposition was David Lipscomb and the **Gospel Advocate**. Lipscomb insisted that people immersed to obey God were scripturally baptized, regardless of their knowledge of the act's effects at the time. Though the McGary view became dominant in Churches of Christ, the issue has never entirely subsided. In the most recent treatment of the question, Jimmy Allen of Harding University defends the Lipscomb position in his book **Rebaptism**.

The questions raging on the other side focused on how to regard unimmersed believers. Are they saved? If so, can they become members in our churches? Some were willing to say yes to both. In 1963 Joseph Belcastro surveyed the roots of the so-called open membership controversy among the Disciples, detailing the variety of positions on the relation of baptism to salvation throughout church history and in the Restoration Movement (**The Relation of Baptism to Church Membership**).

The present volume, then, follows in a long tradition of literature on baptism in the Stone-Campbell Movement. It is a collaborative effort between scholars from Churches of Christ (a capella), independent Christian Churches and Churches of

Christ (instrumental). Though separated by other hermeneutical matters, these bodies share the heritage of belief in immersion of believing adults for remission of sins.

In ten thorough chapters the contributors cover everything from the early leaders' theological background in Reformed and Independent thought (Jack Cottrell and Lynn McMillan), the early views of Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell (Michael Greene and John Mark Hicks), through the John Thomas controversy and the Lunenburg Letter (Roderick Chestnut and John Mark Hicks), to more recent controversies over rebaptism and open membership (Jerry Gross and James North). In the final chapter, editor David Fletcher writes on the design of baptism in the New Testament.

The matter of baptism is much more than an academic question—it is also starkly practical. This book brings that fact to the fore and will help those in the front lines of ministry deal with it in a more informed way both biblically and historically.

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In Search of Christian Unity: A History of the Restoration Movement

by Henry E. Webb

Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1990. 492 pp.

In Search of Christian Unity is an excellent new history of our American Restoration Movement, written from the perspective of the Independent Christian Churches. Dr. Henry Webb, who holds two Ph.D.'s in church history (Xavier University and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary), has taught at Milligan College for many years. His book is a good example of why new histories are needed. For thirty years, we have relied on Murch's Christians Only for a history from the Independent Christians' perspective, and we now have a fine new history to replace Murch's out-of-date work.

Webb has devoted 248 pages to the nineteenth century and 211 to the twentieth—a good balance. His treatment of the Stone-Campbell decades breaks little new ground. But this is not surprising when their stories have been told so often in earlier works. Webb's handling of these years is well organized, well documented, and easy to read. But it does seem that Webb, as so many others, focused on Campbell's leadership to the neglect of Stone. Stone's name does not appear in any chapter title. A chapter on "Religion in Early America" has

fourteen pages about Stone's work with hardly a mention of men such as Rich Haggard and John Mulkey. Webb gives five chapters to Campbell and calls him "the unrivaled leader" of the movement.

Perhaps the new video documentary, "Like Fire in Dry Stubble: The Life of Barton W. Stone" (which includes many comments from Dr. Webb), will give some new insights into Stone's importance in the movement.

The decades following the civil war were "the dark ages of controversy and stagnation," according to Webb. He identifies many causes for the Christian Church/Church of Christ division at the end of the century, including the music controversy, the missionary society and its support of the North during the Civil War, varying understandings of what it meant to restore the primitive church, questions about the silence of scripture and sociological differences between the victorious North and prostrate South. Webb's analysis, in my judgment, is thorough and accurate.

Webb's treatment of the twentieth century has five chapters (127 pages) about the controversies that led to the rupture between Disciples and Independents. Those of us in the non-instrumental churches who are not aware of the impact of theological liberalism on many brethren in the North, and who have not followed their controversies over "open membership" and "restructure," will find this section of Webb's book most helpful.

Like James DeForest Murch, Webb has closed his history with a chapter about each of the three wings of the Restoration Movement today, and these chapters are well done. It does seem to me that Webb may have relied a little too heavily on left-of-the-center sources, rather than the mainstream, for some of his appraisals of us.

The first printing of the book has many printing errors. One dropped out two or three lines of type from a critical explanation of the designations he would use for the various wings of the movement (p. 12). The book has no index in the first printing, but one is supposed to be added in later printings.

Overall, I think Webb has given us an outstanding new history. I am using it as a required text in my course in restoration history at Abilene Christian University—a recommendation that speaks louder than words.

Bill J. Humble
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The Origins of the Restoration Movement: An Intellectual History,

by Richard Tristano.

Atlanta: Glenmary Research Center, 1988.

This recent work by Richard M. Tristano provides a helpful perspective in tracing the intellectual sources of the Restoration Movement. It is all the more interesting because it is written from the point-of-view of an "outsider." Tristano's research was sponsored by the Glenmary Research Center, a Roman Catholic institution in Atlanta, and, perhaps to the surprise of many, his discussion of that history is largely sympathetic.

Tristano's most significant insights center around the inherent intellectual and philosophical tensions in the very fabric of the Restoration ideal. At the heart of the movement were impulses which were basic to its existence but which were difficult to harmonize.

The central tension revolved around the strong desire both for *unity* and *truth*. From the very beginning, the American Restoration Movement was a unity movement. In discussing the work of Thomas Campbell, Tristano says, "What distinguishes Restorationism from Protestant ecumenism is that the Restoration Movement soon became an effort to eliminate denominations and to substitute an actual unification of the Church of Christ."

While virtually all the early leaders came from the Presbyterian Church, significant dialogue was held with members from a wide diversity of denominations. In fact, for seventeen years, the churches associated with Alexander Campbell were officially members of the Redstone Baptist Association. The driving vision in the early years of the movement was the uniting (or ultimately the elimination) of various denominations within one church.

But they must be united under the truth of the New Testament. The goal was not mere institutional unity but unity established on biblical truth. This impulse drove Restoration leaders to make several conclusions clearly at odds with contemporary American Protestantism, most notably the belief in the necessity of believer's baptism by immersion for the forgiveness of sins. This and other doctrinal conclusions led to the ostracization of the Restoration churches by other religious groups and caused a crisis of purpose. Can the drive for truth be compromised for the sake of unity? Can the drive for unity be compromised by too narrow an understanding of truth?

Tristano handles this issue with great sympathy. Both impulses were legitimate and clearly

biblical. But both had their down sides in the movement. The impulse to unity often led to easy ecumenism and theological relativism (with few absolute truths). The impulse for truth often led to exclusivism and arrogance and an open rejection of any religious tolerance. Some Restoration preachers became highly dogmatic and argumentative. As a result, the two primary impulses became almost mutually exclusive. Ironically, the movement which originated from a desire for unity quickly divided. And the consequences of those divisions remain among Restoration churches at the end of the 20th century.

Other intellectual tensions lay at the heart of the movement. Many argued, for example, that everyone can see the Bible alike. On the other hand, they argued that all individuals can interpret the Bible for themselves. But as individuals interpreted for themselves, they found they often interpreted differently. These and other philosophical tensions made resolution difficult and often sowed the seeds of division.

Tristano does an excellent job in tracing the origins of Restoration thought to the philosophies of Thomas Reid, John Locke, and other European scholars, and also to the Radical Reformation of centuries before. He also describes well the interrelationship of the followers of Stone and Campbell,

their eventual merger, and the seeds of disagreement that continued for the decades that followed. Further, he indicates the power of Restoration publications in advancing certain theological positions and forming patterns of Restoration orthodoxy.

Finally, Tristano demonstrates the anti-emotionalism that permeated especially the Campbell wing of the movement. He describes the context of frontier revivalism against which many Restoration leaders reacted.

Tristano's closing lines are worth quoting. He attempts to answer whether or not this unity movement, with all its divisions, is a failure. He answers in the negative. "The need which the Restoration Movement perceived was how to balance the human liberty which Americans cherish, with the message of the Gospel, which after all is not about the diversity but the unity of humanity. How can we balance the human need for pluralism and authority, individual conscience and community, toleration and religious certitude? These are questions for our own age. In these questions, in these perceived needs, rests the genius of the Restoration Movement."

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