

Another Last Will And Testament

While Thomas Campbell was trying to cope with the divided condition of the Presbyterians in Ireland, another Presbyterian minister, Barton W. Stone, was facing similar problems in Kentucky. He participated in the historic Cane Ridge (Kentucky) Revival in 1801. That revival meeting, initiated by Presbyterian preachers, also involved Methodist and Baptist preachers, with about three dozen preachers in all participating. Estimates of the attendance range from 12,000 to 30,000 people. Many people came from Tennessee and Ohio. It was a camp meeting with open-air services conducted simultaneously in various areas throughout the day and far into the night.

This ecumenical venture, thrilling as it was, brought charges from the Synod of Kentucky against some of the participating preachers. This led to the withdrawal from the Synod by Stone and four other preachers who then formed the Springfield Presbytery, consisting of fifteen churches. This presbytery was in existence for only nine months, until June 28, 1804. Its demise was unusual in nature, being willingly finalized by a historic document: *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*. It began with these words:

“The Presbytery of Springfield, sitting at Cane Ridge, in the county of Bourbon, being, through a gracious Providence, in more than ordinary bodily health, growing in strength and size daily; and in perfect soundness of composure of mind; and knowing that it is appointed for all delegated bodies once to die; and considering that the life of every such body is very uncertain, do make and ordain this our last Will and Testament, in manner and form as following, viz.:

“Imprimis. We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling.

“Item. We will that our name of distinction, with its Reverend title, be forgotten, that there be but one Lord over God's heritage and his name one.”

In ten additional Items, these five men who signed the Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery called for freedom from church government and authority, and for the people to resume the right of internal government, accepting the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven. They called upon all to "*cultivate a spirit of mutual forbearance; pray more and dispute less.*"

An *Address* was published with the *Will* restating their rejection of "church sessions, presbyteries, synods, general assemblies, etc." They concluded by declaring their unity with all believers. At that time they agreed to cast off all sectarian designations and call themselves *Christians*.

All who seriously desire Christianity and unity in their purest form must be thrilled by the actions of those men. It is contrary to our nature to admit that we have been misdirected and to try to start from the beginning again. To renounce what one has worked for so ardently and trusted in so sincerely must be like disinheriting one's own child. Few of us would have the conviction and courage to destroy our religious identity willingly. They were not giving up their convictions, but they were obeying convictions matured by openness to learning and reappraisal. Rather than defending their misdirection, as we are inclined to defend our own, they retraced their steps back to the main road of non-sectarian Christianity.

Thomas Campbell came to America in 1807 and was joined by his family, which included his son, Alexander, in 1809, beginning his work in Pennsylvania. It was not until 1824 that Alexander Campbell met Barton W. Stone. Demonstrating the unity that they proclaimed, the two separate movements of these men merged in 1832. This exciting movement to unite the Christians of all the sects met with great success among the frontier people.

Claiming that unity heritage, we have reason for historic pride; yet, we have much reason for disappointment later. Through loss of perspective and misdirection in the generations after Stone and Campbell, the Movement failed to keep the unity. Dividing into three main churches with numerous subdivisions, which range from ecumenical inclusiveness to extreme exclusiveness, the Movement developed a sectarian spirit which has fostered denominational distinctions.

When Stone and his associates recognized their misdirection, they had the courage to dissolve what they had formed and to start over. Should we demonstrate that same courage and wisdom today by formulating "*The Last Will and Testament of the Church of Christ?*" Is that the alternative to the perpetuation of the sectarian exclusivity of the Church of Christ and its name of distinction?

There is no point in dissolving a group unless something better can be accomplished as a result of it. If the individuals involved move on into other existing bodies, what has been gained? Is there an identifiable "one, true church," which is the body at large, somewhere for them to become identified with? Are not those who comprise the Church of Christ parts of the body at large inasmuch as they were added to it when they were baptized into the one body? They are in the body at large as individuals, even though they were not added to their divided groups by the Lord. They joined them. They are not the total body. They err in excluding others who are in the Lord's one body but serving in a "different fellowship." Even though we grieve at our misdirection and deplore our sectarian spirit, we do not deny that we are in the Lord's universal church.

Since we are congregational, the nearest that we can do to follow the example of those in the Springfield Presbytery is to redirect an entire congregation by teaching; yet, it is next to impossible to change a group as a whole. We are seeing many walkout groups, however, who abandon their former congregations because of the hopelessness of change. Some of those begin new groups wearing the Church of Christ name, while

others leave that distinctive name behind. As long as a loving, accepting spirit prevails, these disciples may be commended in the exercise of their God-given freedom. Oppressive situations make such actions expedient. Conviction and courage, rather than a rebellious spirit, bring about reform and new beginnings.

The Springfield Presbytery was an organizational structure. Its member churches and individual members could agree to will it out of existence. There is no organizational structure among Churches of Christ to dissolve. When they dissolved their organization, that in no way changed their individual relationship with God, for, if they were children of God in the structure, they continued to be such afterwards. Within a sectarian framework, they had developed a nonsectarian spirit and a sense of unity which constrained them to dissolve the presbytery. It was not the Last Will that changed their attitude, but their changed perspective produced the document.

Again, if we dissolve into the body at large, which group, or groups, will we be absorbed into? Are any of them more nearly identical with the New Testament standard than the Church of Christ? If so, it is only a matter of degree of conformity, rather than of one group being the true church and the other not being it. Rather than seeking to disperse any group that is in Christ, our aim should be to reform it. That is a lesson we gain from the epistles, for they called for the correction of ills within both the churches and individuals, rather than dissolution of the fellowships.

Individual relationship with God is emphasized so strongly in the New Testament writings that it is debatable if membership in a specific local church was expected. There is no such terminology in the scriptures as "members of the church." There is no indication that they ever "placed membership," enabling a local structure to have a "church roll." Each individual holds a direct relationship with God in the church at large with no man or structure of men, either local or universal, through which he must serve God. Each has a fellowship, which is a sharing in spirit and practice with all other disciples of Christ, rather than just having a fellowship with those in "his congregation" and, perhaps, other identical congregations.

Many of our congregations have become so repressive that they allow for neither freedom nor reformation. Disciples often feel hopeless in such a group and move into a group that gives greater respect for individuality. The individual has that right and must exercise it discreetly in order to serve his/her own spiritual needs best.

Many discouraged disciples are leaving the Church of Christ and going into other organized and structured groups. By such action they may be solving some problems, but they are not solving all of the problems, or even the chief problem relating to unity. They still must ask and answer the questions we raised earlier as to whether there is a truly nonsectarian, nondenominational church to be found.

There is no obvious, visible, or structured nonsectarian, universal body which is composed of all, and only, those who are in Christ. The Lord still has one body; it cannot be divided. Disciples may reject each other, but the unity is not in the disciples so much

as it is in the Head, Christ. Those disciples who comprise the one body have separated themselves into sectarian groups, and the problem is not how to get them into one body, which they are already in, but to get them to cease rejecting each other. Our aim must not be to find a new structure or fellowship for all to unite in, but to redirect our thinking so as to become accepting of all who are in fellowship in, and with, Christ.

In order to do that, I need not give up my own convictions or compromise any doctrinal position. I must accept others as brothers because of their relationship to God in Christ. There is our basis of unity. That does not mean that I must approve all that my brothers believe or practice. They have to continue to work toward correcting their errors even as I must work to correct mine. Each must be in a continuous process of learning, growing, and reformation. Since Christ reconciled us all in one body in himself, he is the one who judges to accept or reject. He has not turned that job over to you and me. He is the one in the midst of the candlesticks and, if one needs removing, he is the one who will do it.

We might dream of a Utopian situation where all religious bodies of the world would execute a last will and testament to dissolve all of the existing churches so they might flow into one universal, unnamed, nonsectarian, nondenominational body; however, that will never be, nor would it solve all problems of divisiveness. The dissolution of the Springfield Presbytery did not solve the problems permanently, for its heirs have not remained as one.

Yes, I like to dream of such a worldwide transformation; yet, when I awake to reality, I know that my best hope is to change attitudes which can dissolve the walls of structured religion.

This is a reprint with revisions of Chapter 28 of my third book, "*Free As Sons.*" []

(Cecil Hook; January 2005)

Talkin' Texas: The Astrodome in Houston is the first domed stadium in the U.S.