

My “Restoration” Heritage: Good or Bad?

Several years ago I weighed in (in the feather-weight division) as a crusader for redirection of the people of my heritage from extreme legalism to grace. Because of that, it is not unusual for some new reader to inquire out of curiosity if I have left the “Church of Christ,” or the “church of Christ.” Reacting adversely to my efforts, a few have demanded, “Why don’t you leave the Church of Christ – you hate it so?”

No, I have not “left the church.” I am still in the Lord’s universal congregation, however you may wish to designate it. And I serve locally with a group whose heritage is of the Stone-Campbell Movement..

If we are identifying the Church of Christ as the universal church, why should I want to leave it? Since the Lord is the one who added me to his congregation, I am not sure that I would know how to leave it. If we are thinking of the Church of Christ as one of the splinter groups of the Stone-Campbell Movement, then I will want to investigate in order to make any needed changes that will identify it with the one produced through the Gospel. My heritage is in the Church of Christ, however correct or flawed that heritage may be.

It is somewhat like my parental heritage. Even though, especially as a teenager, I thought I could point out flaws in Mom and Dad, I never really wished to exchange them for new parents. Since there are no perfect groups, I choose to work with the problems with which I am familiar rather than to trade them for unfamiliar ones in a different group.

Your garden is not without weeds, yet it can still produce good food. Because you are constantly pulling and hoeing weeds out of it, you are showing concern for the value of it. There is a difference in weeding and destroying, and between reformation and opposition. My efforts of redirection arise out of my recognition of the great things we have left behind which should be restored.

About two hundred years ago, Barton W. Stone and other Presbyterian preachers fell out of favor with their group because they cooperated with Baptist and Methodist preachers in the Cane Ridge Revival, a tremendous camp meeting in Kentucky in 1801. He was promoting unity, but that was not acceptable to his people.

Thomas Campbell came to America in 1807 and began preaching among the Presbyterians in Pennsylvania. When he tried to persuade the factions of the Presbyterians to commune together, he met with disfavor. His son, Alexander, still in Ireland, was also concerned about the disunity of the Presbyterian factions who would not share communion.

Both Stone and the Campbells were proposing “to unite the Christians in all the sects” not by uniting them in a new church, but by accepting one another in spite of the barriers men had devised. That concept being generally unacceptable among the churches, these preachers, still unknown to each other, soon found themselves making converts to Christ outside existing churches. Their efforts developed into two unity movements which ultimately joined forces in 1832. However, it was much later that the term “Restoration Movement” was applied. Those men claimed to be reformers, not restorers of a extinct church. A damaged work of art would need restoration. Only in that sense of

correcting misdirections among disciples did they claim to be restorers. “We are Christians only but not the only Christians,” was a motto expressing their ideal.

Having been schooled in the restoration concept, many times I taught lessons on “The Falling Away and Restoration of the Church.” After the true church supposedly had faded from history, we had restored the “one, true church.” We in our particular splinter groups of the Stone-Campbell unity movement were it! We developed an extremely legalistic system of argumentation to prove it. While pleading for unity and “proving” our particular course of unity by the Bible, we continued to divide. Our very message was divisive. We had made a 180-degree turn from the aims of our heritage. The unspoken motto was more like, “We are Christians only and the only Christians.”

Since our heritage in the churches of Christ is ambiguous and contradictory, which heritage shall we promote and which shall we reject? I have chosen to return to the unity aims of the Stone-Campbell Movement rather than promote the divisive course of the “Restoration Movement.” My heritage is from both conflicting concepts. Finding myself in the latter, I work to redirect us into the former. Ideally, we might wish to do as Stone and his associates did. Having dissolved their newly formed Springfield Presbytery, they aimed to dissolve into the church at large. But the church at large, the universal church, does not exist in any visible, organized form with which we may associate or into which we may be assimilated.

Actually, all who have been saved have been assimilated by the Lord into his one assembly. With the universal Church of Christ in mind (not later converts of his who would wear that name), Thomas Campbell declared with true insight, “The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct.” His son, Alexander would later observe that, if there are no saved in the sects, then there are no saved on earth. It is vital that those whom he saves by his grace accept others even as they themselves are accepted. When we raise barriers of acceptance, we renounce the wisdom of Christ who made us all one. These concepts are the roots of my heritage.

What does the Stone-Campbell Movement within the church have to commend its existence? It added much Biblical freshness to the religious scene in America. With no claim of scholarly insights, I list here some valuable contributions.

Individual relationship. There was recognition that our relationship is with Christ rather than with an organized system of religion. It is reconciliation to God rather than “joining the right church.”

Priesthood of all believers. No disciple is subject to a hierarchy, nor is his worship and service mediated through a clergy or organized religion.

Simplicity of liturgy. The individual disciple or congregation can offer worship that expresses the feeling of the heart without prescribed formal ritual or specially ordained leadership. Although we have made an indefensible dividing issue of unaccompanied singing, we have demonstrated the rich value of accapella singing in its simple expression involving the congregation rather than professionals.

Individual freedom. The disciple is accountable to God rather than to man, to a system of men, or to superiors in rank.

Individual responsibility. Each person is accountable for his own understanding of the will of God. No church creed may be bound upon him. He is free to choose the group with whom he assembles. He serves by his own initiative with no one dictating what he must do in serving God.

Congregational autonomy and independence. Christianity is not an organized system of religion. It must be noted, however, that much of the “power” of our Movement became its weakness, or stumbling block. Like the power of choice given to Adam and Eve allowed them to choose the wrong path, so our freedom has allowed disciples to separate into dissociating groups. The remedy for this, however, is not in taking away individual and congregational freedom and forcing conformity.

Re-emphasis of baptism. Although, eventually, many of us became too legalistic in our views of baptism, our Movement called attention to the Biblical emphasis, mode, purpose, and meaning of the ritual of baptism as a part of the conversion process.

Distinction of the covenants. Alexander Campbell’s “Sermon on the Law” setting forth the distinction between the old and the new covenant was thought to be radical when he delivered it but it added much to the common understanding of the Christian religion. The same is true of Thomas Campbell’s theological treatise, *Declaration and Address*..

No item above was necessarily a new concept to all Christians and churches. But the freshness of all these combined in a movement appealed to the common man as being Biblical, sensible, and practical.. Great acceptance was given across our new nation. The exciting, fast growing Movement could not be ignored nor could outside forces stop it.

Sadly, however, the movement gradually lost its focus, and internal doctrinal disputes fragmented it. It suffered intensely from the divisive effects of legalism, restorationism, and patternism. Unwritten creeds defined each splinter group. The role of shepherds in the congregations developed into that of authoritarian elders. Worship and service of the individual became funneled through and controlled by the organized congregational system ruled by elders. The means of acceptable worship were narrowly defined to five exercises. The emphasis of a works-oriented righteousness developed into an oppressive system which became more burdensome than supportive.

These charges do not apply to every individual and every congregation. There have always been those who enjoy their freedom in Christ. In too many communities, however, our people have painted their own self-righteous portrait as the only ones with a chance of going to heaven.

Having formerly identified with that image of our movement, with chagrin and grief, I renounce it and seek to identify with the original image of our movement. This is not a matter of my “changing churches” but of changing direction. I can also report with much satisfaction that the number who are taking this course is growing rapidly. Realizing our misdirections, our people are recognizing their treasured heritage and are finding great joy in embracing it again.

There is reason to believe the renewal of our original message will ignite another unity movement in a nation tired of religious division. The phenomenal reception given to the unifying, Christ-centered writings of Max Lucado are undeniable evidence of this. His books remain on the best-seller list in the category of religion year after year. What a shame and tragedy that all those in our movement do not join in proclaiming such a basic

message! God has raised up a nationally-recognized and loved leader in redirection. Thank God, many are on that road with him.

Due to the fallibility and errant tendency of man, local communities of believers will always need reformation and redirection. This point is evident in the apostolic epistles. To resist or oppose any corrective change from the status quo in any generation is to fail to see that most vital message. Those who think to have found all the truth may denounce reformers as *change agents* in a most bigoted manner.

Whether we are considering our heritage or any newly perceived concept, it is most important that we “..test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thes. 5:22). []

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