

The Search for Truth:
A History of the Restoration Movement
“A Crack Forms in the Restoration Movement”
December 17, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

You cannot place a definitive date on the effort to restore NT Christianity. As we have tried to show, many different people, in many different countries, have tried to go back to the Bible for Christian piety and/or church practices. In the same way, then, you cannot make a definitive person the head of any effort to restore NT Christianity because so many were making efforts to do that very thing.

But, when we pick up in the mid-19th century, in the 1850s, about a dozen years before the American Civil War gets started, the restoration effort is going along fairly well. We have a host of men who are eloquent in the pulpit and persuasive with their pens who are calling people to leave their denominational creeds behind and everything that is authorized in them and going back to the Bible and doing what Christ commanded, through His apostles, the Christians to do in the first century.

It was easy for these men to leave those creeds. It was easy for them to leave the denominational hierarchies that they saw imposed its will on small congregations of worshipers. It was easy to leave Calvinism behind. It was not as easy for some of them to leave infant baptism behind but eventually they did as they continued to pursue NT Christianity. That pursuit, the pursuit of Truth, also led them to recognize that baptism, immersion, was in fact, for the forgiveness of sins. Leaving infant baptism behind led Barton Stone, the Campbells, and others out of the Presbyterian church. Teaching immersion as the (only) mode of baptism led them into the Baptist fold for a while. But, when they came to understand the purpose of baptism, for the forgiveness of sins, it led them out of the Baptist group as well.

What they really wanted to be was just Christians, answerable to Jesus Christ and Him alone, submissive to His word. It is a great idea, simple, and easy to understand. But it is not always easy to follow. The first major crack forms in the restoration movement, beginning in 1849 with the establishment of the American Christian Missionary Society.

THE MISSIONARY SOCIETY:

When Alexander Campbell was writing and printing his first religious paper, *The Christian Baptist*, he was against missionary societies. But, inexplicably, by the time he had started *The Millennial Harbinger*, his view had changed. In 1849, Campbell called for a massive meeting of Christians and Reformers, to take place in Cincinnati that fall. This was not a meeting to make rules or a creed; it was just for fellowship. But at that meeting, the idea was proposed to unite the forces of the “Christians” in the effort to do mission work. Estimates of the size of the movement number between 100,000-300,000 (West, I:129).

The restoration effort was strong in KY (50,000), OH (the largest with 20,000), IN (20,000), MO (25,000, before the War), PA but Christians wanted to send missionaries to other parts of the US as well as overseas. In IL, Abraham Lincoln had a close friend named Walter Bowles who was a well-known preacher in that state. Before the War, the church in the south was small and struggling.

The church existed in Detroit as early as the 1850s with one congregation having its own building by 1856. This is all very commendable and a very worth while goal. Campbell thought that these individual congregations of Christians needed some type of structure in their effort to do mission work, some type of organization so they could do effective mission work.

Campbell's view of mission work sort of reminds me of the Left today. We see socialism failing in country after country after country but the Left today think that they are smart enough that *they* can make socialism work in *our* country. By the same token, Campbell criticized and lambasted missionary societies through *The Christian Baptist* but, apparently, he thought that if he were influential in such a missionary society, he could make it work scripturally.

Congregations were already meeting on a county-wide basis in different places as early as 1829. The first statewide meeting was held in Indianapolis, IN in 1839. State "conventions" were held in KY, VA, IL, and MO. Early on, the men in charge of these meetings and conventions emphasized that they are not "decision-making" bodies nor were they making rules for the church as a whole.

At that first brotherhood wide meeting in Cincinnati in 1849, there were 156 Christians in attendance and the suggestions were also made that every congregation should have a Sunday school, provide their churches with a list of books that could be used for Sunday class, encourage state and district meetings, take care as they chose their evangelists (recommending doing so only upon the recommendation of two or more churches), and to keep the Lord's Day holy. So, what we have here is the beginnings of a convention making rules, even if they are just suggestions now, for other churches and you have the beginning of a church hierarchy unknown to the NT pattern of Christianity.

Now, having lived and worked in the mission field of Romania, I can understand and appreciate where these men are coming from. You want to provide fellowship opportunities as much as possible when your own congregation is small, struggling, and a long way away from other like-minded Christians. For a congregation that is small and, perhaps, naive about the ways of the world, I can see where Christians who are more mature (or at least think they are more mature), making suggestions that these congregations seek the input of the mature Christian before they choose someone to preach for them. But, what we have here is the seed of a superstructure, a hierarchy, a paternalistic view of Christianity. Paternalism is "the policy or practice on the part of people in positions of authority of restricting the freedom and responsibilities of those subordinate to them in the subordinates' supposed best interest."

If the Swartz Creek church of Christ plants a new congregation of the church of Christ in the UP sometime in the future, once that congregation has men who can begin making decisions for that congregation, the oversight of the eldership here at Swartz Creek would end. It would become more of an advisory role rather than a rule-making role. If we continued to support the work financially and the church started doing things the eldership here did not approve, then the church here could easily stop sending the support and send it somewhere else. But the NT creates autonomous congregations of Christians under their own, self-chosen, body of leaders, whether elders or mature Christian men. That is the pattern that came into conflict with the proposal of a missionary society within the restoration movement.

Alexander Campbell was chosen as President; it was believed that his support was necessary for its success. D. S. Burnet, whom I introduced last week, served as the driving force behind the society, having already tried to establish a Bible and tract society; he was chosen as the First Vice President. Walter Scott was another Vice President. To be a member of the society, you had to give money. Life members could give \$20; life directors could give \$100. Churches could have a voice in the society based on their donations. The society was to have officers, managers, an executive board. It was the payment of money required for participation that would be a huge source of contention.

At the first meeting, they collected \$2,140 in subscriptions with pledges amounting to over \$5,000. The first missionary sent out was Dr. James T. Barclay to Palestine to minister among the Jews and Muslims, in 1851. He lived in worked in Jerusalem for ten years.

A congregation in Connellsville, PA was one of the first to voice their opposition to a missionary society. Their criticisms included these:

1. They criticized the financial arrangement.
2. The church is the only institution authorized by God to perform mission work. The church is *the* missionary society.
3. To argue for the society based on “the ends justifies the means” had already brought into Christianity infant baptism, sprinkling, the Pope, and others.
4. The society would divide the church over something that was outside of biblical authority.

One of the earliest individual preachers to speak against the missionary society was Jacob Creath, Jr. Creath was the son of a Baptist minister, born in VA in 1799. That family was deeply religious with four of Jacob’s brothers also becoming ministers. He was baptized into the Baptist church in 1817 and attended UNC-CH to study for the ministry. He also studied at Columbia in Washington, DC. Influenced by Campbell’s *The Christian Baptist*, Creath eventually broke with the Baptist church. He could not find evidence in the Scriptures for the teaching of a direct work of the Holy Spirit on one’s heart and, he claimed they should follow the Bible as their only guide. The word of God was the instrument by which the Spirit created faith in man’s heart and to become a Christian, one simply had to obey. But, that was heresy to the Baptist church. At Creath’s heresy trial before the Great Crossings Baptist Church was a Baptist preacher named John T. Johnson who would later convert and attributed his conversion to Jacob Creath, Jr.

Jacob Creath Sr. was his uncle and they were expelled from the Baptists. Creath still held to Campbell’s earlier views, expressed in *The Christian Baptist*, on missionary societies and viewed them as illegitimate. He was nicknamed “The Iron Duke of the Restoration.” He mainly preached in MO and died in 1886.

I mentioned last week that two other men who were very outspoken against the missionary society were Tolbert Fanning and William Lipscomb through the pages of the magazine *The Gospel Advocate* which they started in 1855. It is largely through the influence of the *GA* that the churches of Christ who were against missionary societies and instrumental music in worship came to be the strongest in the south while the north tended to follow the “pro” path on both issues, leading to the Christian Church being stronger in the north.

If the driving force behind the restoration effort was: “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent,” then the operative question was: “How and in what manner can the various congregations work together to convert the world?” The missionary society forced everyone, every one who cared, to go back and search the Scriptures for the answer to that question.

Those who were against missionary societies recognized that the word “church” is used in two ways (actually three - it also means “assembly” in a few texts: 1 Cor 11:18): universally and locally. The church universal has no officers and no specific work to do, no organization at all. It is the local congregation that is tasked with evangelizing its community and doing so under the oversight of elders. So, the plan is for a congregation to establish another congregation and allow it to evangelize its own community.

In the *Millennial Harbinger* (May, 1849), Campbell wrote: “matters of prudential arrangements for the evangelizing of the world, for the better application of our means and resources, according to the exigencies of society and the ever-varying complexion of things around us - are left without a single law, statute, ordinance, or enactment in the New Testament” (West, I: 169). It is not hard to see that Campbell’s argument boils down to this: “The end justifies the means.” To word it another, more simpler way, since the NT has no specific plan for evangelism, then expediency allows the church universal to establish a society for the propagation of the Gospel.

So, the primary argument *for* the missionary society is that the NT does not give a pattern for world-wide evangelism so that the church *might* create a missionary society, a “para-church” organization to do the work of evangelism. Early on, the first *anti*-society argument revolved around Article 3 of the society’s constitution: Membership in the society was dependent on paying money. But, the financial arrangement was not the only criticism. Many feared that the society would become a rule-making body for the church, as we have already seen the society making “suggestions” for churches. But the most important criticism of the missionary society was that it usurped the work and role of the church itself. That is, the church of Christ *is* God’s missionary society.

The “ends” do not “justify” the means if the *means* themselves are without biblical authority. The question is: Did God specify *who* is to carry out the great commission? The churches in Detroit met together and produced a statement in 1850, printed in the *Millennial Harbinger*: “we cannot also approve of the constitutions themselves, inasmuch as they create new organizations, distinct from, and in some respects, independent of the churches; which we believe to be contrary to the teaching of God’s holy word, and also to the example of the churches under the guidance of the apostles” (West, I:199).

It would not really serve our purposes to make a list of who was *for* the society and who was *against* the society. Some also had a “wait and see” approach and would eventually be against the society because they saw it dividing the brotherhood. The *Gospel Advocate* in the south and *The American Christian Review* in the north were against the society. Benjamin Franklin, of course, in the *Review* was first in favor of the society and then turned against it.

Because of the opposition to paying membership, the society, in the 1850s, decided to do away with that article. But, that did not help matters much. At this point, let me summarize the arguments used *against* the society:

1. Membership was based on payment.
2. The Society could infringe on the autonomy of local congregations.
3. Human organizations to do the work of the church are unauthorized and, therefore, unscriptural.

The American Christian Missionary Society began sending out some missionaries, to the extent their finances allowed. Dr. James T. Barclay was the first under the auspices of the missionary society, who went to Palestine, to evangelize the Jews and Muslims. In my next class I teach, I will spend more time studying the history of mission work in the churches of Christ, maybe 1 or 2 classes.

Here, we are concentrating on the pursuit of truth and how the desire to do mission work affected that pursuit. The discussion over the missionary society waged in periodicals and pulpits for the next decade. Then, in 1860, the largest missionary convention assembled with fifteen states represented. \$15,000 had been raised in the past year with 1,344 new members of the church added through the efforts of the missionary society. But by the time the

society met the *next* year, the Civil War had started and in that convention, someone proposed a resolution stating that the convention members believed it was their duty “as Christians, to ask our brethren everywhere to do all in their power to sustain the proper and constitutional authorities of the Union.” It is obvious that a significant number of attendees were northerners with Union sympathies.

Two years later, in 1863, the Convention met and this particular convention is referred to as the “War Convention.” At this convention, a resolution was offered that threw the sympathies of the Convention behind the Union effort referring to those who fought on the side of the South as “armed traitors [seeking] to overthrow our Government.” Those pro-Union statements led to the society becoming even more unpopular, especially in the south.

We are going to take our leave of the missionary society debate for the time being. I want to take a step back in time and give some information about the efforts among reformers to establish institutions of higher education as well as talk about the impact of the Civil War on the effort to restore NT Christianity. In the mid-1860s, the missionary society is beginning to cause disruption in the church and among brethren but it is the introduction of mechanical instruments of music that is the straw that breaks the proverbial camel’s back and many brethren see the two issues stand and fall together - on the principle of biblical authority.

Next week: “Higher Education in the Pursuit of Truth”