# **ALEXANDER CAMPBELL AND THE MISSIONARY SOCIETIES**

# **“SYMPTOMS OF THE FUTURE”**

When the Civil War ended in the spring of 1865, the seeds of division among the Restoration churches were being aggressively sown. The month Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox, Moses E. Lard, published an editorial in *Lard’s Quarterly* entitled, “The Work of the Past—Symptoms of the Future.” In it he described some activities that he saw as “ill-omened symptoms in our ranks.” Among these were “Philosophic Speculations,” preachers assuming pastoral power, and the “spirit of innovation,” evidenced in the “organ mania” and communion with “the sprinkled sects.” He could have added missionary societies, but being sympathetic with them, he failed to see them as “ill-omened symptons.”1

For thirty years before the war, there was general unity among brethren connected with the Restoration Movement. It was partly due to the things Lard saw as ominous “Symptoms of the Future” that this amiable relationship changed. The symptoms manifested a different attitude toward Bible authority and toward the idea of restoring the ancient order of things. Many of the first generation restorers were still living at the beginning of the war. Barton W. Stone died in 1844, but Thomas Campbell lived to 1854. Walter Scott died in 1861 and Alexander Campbell in 1866. John Smith, Samuel Rogers, Tolbert Fanning, Thomas M. Allen, Philip S. Fall, Jacob Creath, Jr., James M. Mathews, and other pre-war preachers survived the sectional conflict, some of them living into the 1880s. But most of these either went along with the changes, or were too battle-weary to raise an effective voice against them. Fanning and Creath are notable exceptions.

In truth, we tend to be tolerant in our view of many of these brethren because some of the innovations that were rising in their latter years did not show their perilous fruit until after their death. Lard observed: “The wise seaman catches the first whiff of the distant storm, and adjusts his ship at once.” But few men are prudent enough “seamen” to see where a seemingly minor departure might lead in the future. This is one value of studying the Restoration Movement. It clearly shows what happens when people depart from the once delivered faith in the pursuit of innovations that, in the beginning, seems to be a good work.

While attention in this essay centers in one area of controversy—extra-congre-gational organizations—a study of the matter would reveal that almost all of those who accepted one of the liberal views that Lard fretted about also accepted the others. And most of those who rejected one rejected all. Why was this pattern of behavior generally followed in both directions? What caused men who accepted the preacher-pastor system, to also accept the organ in Christian worship and the missionary society? Why did many who accepted these innovations go on to embrace philosophical speculation and open membership? And what caused those who objected to the preacher-pastor to also object to the other things? The answer, we believe, rests in the attitude of brethren toward Bible authority. It is the view of objective Restoration historians, both liberal and conservative, that there was a dramatic change in attitude and direction in the Restoration movement from its inception prior to 1830 and the time when the second generation leaders came to the fore in the years following the Civil War.

This is borne out by A.T. DeGroot in writing about “The Era of Controversy.” DeGroot, who would be ranked with the more liberal wing of the Disciple’s of Christ, was hardly a “legalist.” Yet, he said: “Theoretically, the restoration plea involved an exact reproduction of the early church.”2 The objectives of the pioneers, as their thinking congealed into a cohesive movement by 1830, were woven in three traditions. (1) They were evangelical in their concern for the gospel and its relation to the lost. (2) They were catholic in their concern for unity among those who adopted the Restoration plea: “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.” (3) They applied the long unappreciated principle of restoring “the ancient order of things” as the means by which to accomplish the first two goals.

# Lard’s “Work of the Past—Symptoms of the Future,” was on target for the age in which he lived. Some of the things he then saw as “symptoms” of the future, we now see as the work of the past. While Lard did not believe the churches would divide over the things he mentioned, how could it not have been otherwise? History shows that it was not. Instrumental music in the worship, as well as missionary societies in the work of the church, became wedges that necessitated division, if the Restoration plea was to be maintained. So division came. Then those who opted for philosophical speculations and practices leading to open membership further divided those who sought to occupy a loosening of the Restoration plea and some of those who once preached non-denomi-national Christianity, in adopting these symptoms, became denominations themselves. Let us be careful lest we follow the same trail away from the ancient order of things. That there are symptoms among us of brethren becoming weary of our plea that are as ominous as those in Lard’s day is apparent to any who bothers to look. We ignore them to our own spiritual peril. “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” (1 Cor. 10:12).

# **CONGREGATIONAL INDEPENDENCE**

One of the landmarks in the Restoration Movement from the beginning has been congregational independence. In willing the dissolution of the Springfield Presbytery in 1804, Barton W. Stone and his fellow rebels against Presbyterian authority wrote several items pertaining to extra-congregational organizations, which they denounced, and congregational independence, which they embraced. In regard to the presbytery itself, they said “knowing it is appointed for all delegated bodies once to die; and considering that the life of every such body is very uncertain, (we) do make and ordain this our last will and testament.” Their first item, regarding the Springfield Presbytery, reads: “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.”3 As the third item, they write: “We *will*, that our power of making laws for the government of the church, and executing them by delegated authority, forever cease; that the people may have free course to the Bible, and adopt *the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus*.”4 Further, they say: “We *will*, that the Church of Christ resume her native right of internal government.” And then this: “We *will*, that each particular church, as a body, actuated by the same spirit, choose her own preacher and support him by a free-will offering, without a written *call* or *subscription*, admit members, remove offenses; and never henceforth *delegate* her right of government to any man or set of men whatever.”5

It is true that the churches associated with the Stone movement held “consultation meetings” and “camp meetings” well beyond the War Between the States. But they viewed these largely as independent gatherings of individuals for mutual edification and not as extra-congregational organizations connected with the churches. There were some things they did that tended toward organization and these no doubt in time contributed to the rise of the missionary societies, but “consultation meetings” and “camp meetings” as such were justified by the Scriptures on the basis of individual activity.

The Campbell branch of the movement was also strongly opposed to societies and committed to congregational independence, even though their churches belonged to some Baptist associations in the beginning. But by 1830, they saw their inconsistency, became convinced that associations were wrong, and abandoned them. This occurred with the dissolution of the Mahoning Association in that year. This act furthered their separation from the Baptists and helped prepare them for their union with the Stone movement beginning the following year.

Congregational independence and the rejection of extra-congregational organiza-tions to oversee or to perform the work of the churches were thus rejected. But by 1849, the leading brethren of the combined movement created the American Christian Missionary Society and elected Alexander Campbell as its first president, an office he retained until his death, although he never presided over its meetings. Campbell’s views are important because he was without doubt the single most influential voice in the Restoration Movement, prior to the War Between the States. Without his promotion and endorsement, the society may have been delayed for several years. But even with his powerful weight on that side, many brethren opposed the society and there was sufficient disinterest to make it a practical failure as an effective force in evangelism.

Historical observation shows that where congregational independence was adhered to, the other important items of restoration (teaching, faith, and practice) were more assiduously held. And where congregational independence was surrendered for extra-congregational institutions of whatever sort, the more likely it was that the churches became loose in the matter of teaching, faith, and practice. This may be due to the domino effect: accepting one error leads to the acceptance of another. But instrumental music, although more immediately disruptive of unity among the churches, may not have had as much influence on the digression that led to division as the missionary society. Some Christian Churches today that use the instrument are more conservative in the other Restoration goals than many non-instrumental churches of Christ.

One reason a change in organization is so pervasively digressive is that it exposes the churches that accept it to a sort of hierarchical influence that tends to corrupt from the top. Witness how quickly churches within the influential scope of Bible colleges (supposedly independent of the churches) swept them along with the college-in-the-budget and the orphan home aspect of institutionalism. An Arkansas brother who had been an elder in a faithful church for fifty years said, in his view, the leading Bible college in that state had done much more harm to the church in Arkansas than it had ever done good. Within the range of its influence, a majority all of the churches became institutional.

But for whatever reason, history bears out the fact that apostasy usually has its beginning in the alteration of the congregational form of church government and activity. This happened in the early church, when the plural eldership drifted into a one-man bishopric and the local limit of the elders’ oversight gradually evolved into a diocesan concept. It also happened in the missionary society-instrumental music division of 1906. And it happened in the institutional-social gospel division of the l950s and l960s. In each of these, the change in the New Testament order of church government, or congregational independence, became the first and most important element in the ensuing departures.

# **CAMPBELL AND THE MISSIONARY SOCIETY**

The creation of the American Christian Missionary Society in 1849 carried the blessing of Alexander Campbell. This was enough to give it credence with many brethren and to discourage opposition. We should never underestimate the influence of outstand-ing preachers in swaying many brethren in one direction or another. Perhaps this is a natural proclivity of leadership and one reason God designed the church to limit the power of uninspired men. In several articles during the 1840s, Campbell advocated a national association for missionary work. He carefully threaded his way through the subject to turn many of the leading brethren in that direction. Such was his influence that had he opposed the society, even with many favoring it, its creation may have delayed its creation until after his death.

Two questions arise regarding Campbell’s sanction of the society. Did he change his thinking about societies, as many acknowledge, or did he always believe in organized missionary work, as some claim? What were his views in the *Christian Baptist*; did he really oppose societies in that publication, or did he only denounce their abuses?

Concerning the first question, it seems clear that Campbell did change his views, in spite of denials by W.K. Pendleton and others. Walter Wilson Jennings says: “In the early days, Campbell was opposed to Bible, tract, and missionary societies, Sunday-schools, and associations…. He feared that the Sunday-school would bring a national creed and a national church establishment.” Then after noticing some of Campbell’s writings in the *Christian Baptist*, Jennings writes: “All of the radical statements quoted were made early in Campbell’s life. He changed front on many of these questions, and decidedly modified his later utterances. Thus, with the organization of the American Christian Missionary Society, he was elected its first president and served in that capacity for about fourteen years.”6

If Campbell changed, in what sense did he change? W.E. Garrison, writing about Campbell’s opposition to societies in *The Christian Baptist*, says: “The three characteristics of the existing churches, Baptists included, which the Christian Baptist regarded as innovations and corruptions particularly needing to be detected and exposed were these: first, the pretensions of the clergy; second, unauthorized organizations of the churches, societies to do the work of the churches, and all ‘popular schemes’ for supporting clergy, churches, or societies; third, the use of creeds as standards of ortho-doxy or tests of fellowship.” Commenting on the second of these, Garrison writes: “The attack upon unscriptural organizations included within its scope all manner of societies (Bible and missionary) formed to do work which properly belonged to the church, all ecclesiastical structures (synods, presbyteries, conferences, assemblies) which claimed legislative or administrative control over local congregations, and those Baptist asso-ciations which had assumed such functions. The first of these categories was the only one in regard to which Mr. Campbell’s views subsequently changed.”7

What were Campbell’s views in the *Christian Baptist*? The answer may help to show why some argued that he did not change on societies. At the time he relentlessly fought societies, he held membership in churches that belonged to Baptist associations. When the Mahoning Association voted to disband in 1830, he disapproved the action. Was he inconsistent? The difficulty rests in what it was that Campbell opposed. Garrison explains: “Theoretically, the associations were voluntary organizations for mutual aid and edification to which the constituent churches sent messengers but to which they surrendered none of their local autonomy. Actually, many of them assumed legislative and judicial functions. The practice in this regard was not uniform. It became less so as Campbell’s influence extended, provoking some to take stern action against it, winning others to follow his lead. The Mahoning Association was free and open from the time of its organization, being formed by churches already permeated by the new teachings.”8 So Campbell looked on the association as little more than a voluntary convention of brethren for mutual aid and edification, without the characteristics of the societies against which he inveighed.

Campbell was inconsistent, but in his mind there was a difference. Garrison writes: “It had come to be generally agreed that the churches should follow the New Testament pattern of government, and that there was no primitive precedent for anything quite like a Baptist association, which, while disclaiming de jureauthority, nevertheless exercised a good deal of de facto control over the churches….. It seemed to many that associations were unscriptural and might be dangerous. It was perhaps at Scott’s instigation, certainly with his support, that John Henry introduced a resolution ‘that the Mahoning Association, as an advisory council, or an ecclesiastical tribunal, should cease to exist.’ Alexander Campbell, who was rising to oppose the motion, was dissuaded by Scott. It was adopted unanimously.”9

Robert Richardson tells about the time when “the lawfulness of associations” arose among the Reformers. That abuses existed was readily admitted. He says: “Many began to fear that such abuses were inherent in the very nature of such organizations, and that they might, however prudently handled for a time, become unexpectedly engines of mischief. As there was no positive command for them, others among the disciples regarded their existence as incompatible with the principle they professed of adhering closely to Scripture precept and precedent. Hence, when the Mahoning Association met this year (1830) at Austintown, there was found to exist an almost universal conviction that some public expression on the subject was demanded by the interest of the cause. Mr. Campbell, who was present, entertained no doubt that churches had a right to appoint messengers to a general meeting, to bear intelligence to it and to bring home intelligence from it, or transact any special business committed to them…. A large majority was, however, found to be opposed to everything under the name or character of an associa-tion; and it was finally resolved, unanimously, that the Mahoning Associations (as such) should never meet again. It was then resolved into a simple annual meeting for worship, and to hear reports of the progress of the gospel.”10

In 1884, F. M. Green, associate editor of the *Christian Standard*, wrote a book on Christian Missions, with an introduction by Pendleton. Green tried to make a case for Campbell’s change by claiming he did not change. He says: “In the Christian Baptist Mr. Campbell’s work is more general than specific.” He describes the seven years of that journal as “the rush of the hurricane” and “the sea at high tide and mighty storms on top.” “But,” he continues, “when the cycle of seven years of stormy life had been completed, and Mr. Campbell had in a large measure conquered a peace, and was disposed to look more calmly and critically into his already projected work (The Millennial Harbinger), he wrote, ‘Many subjects introduced into his work have not been fully and systematically discussed.”11 But anyone who has read the *Christian Baptist* knows that opposition to missionary societies is not one of them.

To strengthen his case, Green quotes Pendleton’s 1866 address to the American Christian Missionary Society, in which he attacked “a class among us who have a sort of bibliolatry toward the Christian Baptist, and, as is usual in such cases, they imagine that it has uttered many oracles, which upon a careful study it will be found, are not to be discovered on its pages.” Pendleton claimed that Campbell gave little attention to missions and that what he said had been misunderstood. “Not only is the measure of interest which was given to this subject greatly exaggerated, but the spring and main motive of it are almost universally misunderstood. We feel that it is due the great name of Alexander Campbell to vindicate his memory from the charge that he was ever opposed to true missionary work, or true and scripturally conducted missions…. ‘Their missionary plans’ was but one feature of many and this, as a plan, not as a legitimate purpose, he criticized, with a moderation and caution, however, which showed that he desired to touch it but gently.”12

Pendleton and others have accepted this view of Campbell’s opposition to societies. They are grossly mistaken! Garrison shows that “societies to do the work of the churches” was one of the three main “innovations and corruptions” the *Christian Baptist* opposed. Pendleton used the same tactic institutionalists of the mid-twentieth century used to justify extra-congregation arrangements to do the work of the church. He con-fused opposition to the “true missionary work” with the schemes of men by which the work is done. To oppose the schemes or plans, in their view, was to oppose missionary work. No one claims that Campbell opposed missionary work, or “true and scripturally conducted missions.” But he clearly and not so gently opposed missionary societies.

# **WHY CAMPBELL CHANGED**

It seems strange that Campbell’s views, by the time of his death in 1866, could be so distorted, as W.K. Pendleton says, to be “almost universally misunderstood.” But it does not seem difficult to understand Campbell. In the first number of the *Christian Bap-tist*, he wrote a long article on “The Christian Religion.” In regard to “the societies called churches,” he said: “The order of their assemblies was uniformly the same. It did not vary with *moons and seasons*. It did not change as dress, nor fluctuate as the manners of the times. Their devotion did not diversify itself into the endless forms of modern times. They had no monthly concerts for prayer; no solemn convocations; no great fasts, nor preparation, nor thanksgiving days. Their churches were not fractured into missionary societies, Bible societies, education societies; nor did they dream of organizing such in the world…. They neither transformed themselves into any other kind of association, nor did they fracture and sever themselves into divers societies. They view the church of Jesus Christ as the scheme of Heaven to ameliorate the world; as members of it, they considered themselves bound to do all they could for the glory of God and the good of men. They dare not transfer to a missionary society, or Bible society, or education society, a cent or a prayer, lest in so doing they should rob the church of its glory, and exalt the inventions of men above the wisdom of God. *In their church capacity alone they moved*.”13

Regarding opposition to the American Christian Missionary Society, Errett Gates, in his l905 history of the Restoration, writes: “The society was opposed on the ground that there was neither precept nor example in the New Testament for the organization of societies for the spread of the gospel. Some of the bitterest satire in the columns of the Christian Baptist had been directed against the ‘mercenary schemes’ of missionary, tract, and Bible societies of the various denominations. Campbell’s approval of the organization of the new society did not save it from assaults of many of his brethren. The enemies of the society went back to the Christian Baptist for their most effective epithets against the new scheme, and Alexander Campbell of 1823 was arrayed against Alexander Campbell of 1849.”14

Jacob Creath, Jr. was the first notable opponent of the American Christian Missionary Society. In one of his answers to Campbell, he wrote: “Now, permit me, my dear brother, to say to you in all kindness and candor, that your brethren who now oppose conventions, and who have opposed them since they entered this Reformation, are equally sorry to find you and others opposing conventions in the great platform you laid down for us in the Christian Baptist, and now to find you and them advocating conventions as zealously as you then opposed them. If you are right now, you were wrong then. If you were right in the Christian Baptist, we are right now, in opposing conventions. We follow the first lessons you gave us on the subject. If we are wrong, Brother Campbell taught us the wrong. Instead of denying this fact, and endeavoring to conceal it, and to throw the blame upon us, we believe it would be more just and Christian to confess the change, and to acknowledge that the arguments you offered in the Christian Baptist, against conventions, are much more unanswerable than any that have been offered for them since that time. It is the desire of many brethren, who sincerely love and admire you, that you will reconcile the arguments in the Christian Baptist, offered against conventions, with those you now offer for them. We are unable to do this, and, therefore, we ask it as a favor of you to do it.”15

Campbell never admitted changing and, in fact, insisted that he had not changed. But Restoration students have a hard time reconciling what he wrote in 1823 with what he wrote in 1849. If this can be harmonized, one of two things must be admitted. (1) Campbell favored missionary societies at the time he was denouncing them and contending that the early disciples in doing the work of the church moved only in their congregational capacity. If true, Campbell was less than honest in his war on societies because he never let on that he then favored them. And a favorable view of societies was undetected by able contemporaries like Creath, Tolbert Fanning, Benjamin Franklin, and David Lipscomb. This explanation must be rejected in view of Campbell’s moral integrity. (2) Campbell never fully understood the nature of the American Christian Missionary Society and endorsed it without such knowledge. How could this be? He, like most of the pioneers, saw the advantage of brethren getting together in a general meeting and was strongly in favor of such. His thinking, especially in later years, may have blurred between a meeting of that kind and the American Christian Missionary Society. Without attempted to exonerate Campbell in his endorsement of the society or the erroneous arguments he made in its behalf, a case can be made for the latter. The first biographers of Benjamin Franklin, writing of the society, said: “Alexander Campbell approved, and for years was nominally president, although so advanced in years and feeble in strength that he never presided over its sessions. He was present a number of times, and read an address at the opening sessions.”16 John T. Lewis said: “I doubt if any one can show from Mr. Campbell’s writings that he ever claimed to have changed his views on the subject. If not, then we should be slow to accuse him of changing, because he *consented* to something in his old age that he evidently did not understand.”17

David Lipscomb testified in the church trial at Newbern, Tennessee, in 1903. Speaking of Campbell, he said: “My own conviction is, that Alexander Campbell never, consciously, changed his position at all; that he reached a period in his life, and had done so ... that while his mental grasp of things that had occurred years before seemed good, and he could make a brilliant and strong oration, and everything of that kind, at the same time, his mind had failed to grasp events around him, and he never did realize the kind of a society of which he was president. Now, that is my conviction of it. Another thing is, he was exceedingly amiable. He loved his friends, and his friends loved him. Such a man in old age and failing will power, I know from experience, is easily influenced by his friends, and Mr. Campbell fell under the influence of those friends that were building up this society right around him. W.K. Pendleton, his chief adviser at those periods, was the chief one in building up these societies, and Mr. Campbell, under his assurance that it was not opposed to what he previously advocated, was led along.”18

John T. Lewis also quotes from other sources as proof of Campbell's failing mental capacities. He then made this studied observation: “I do not believe a greater injustice was ever done to the life and teaching of a man than that which Mr. Campbell’s friends perpetrated upon him when they took him from the head of the ‘Reformation’ and made him ‘head’ of the 'American Christian Missionary Society,’ *a faction of the Reformation,* a thing that every fiber of his being and every pulsation of his great heart would have rebelled against when that ‘sagacious brain’ was the great luminary it once had been.”19

Why did Campbell change? It was most likely the combination of influences, not excluding his declining health and failing memory. Certainly his aggressive liberal associates who knew the power of his name on the product they were selling their brethren had a part. But it seems that the growth of the movement, Campbell’s prestige in the world, and the “respectability” that the church was gaining also may have clouded his thinking and made it easier for him to endorse the society. But regardless of all this, another interesting element enters the picture. In Campbell’s will, written in his own hand in 1862 and amended in 1864, he willed that a sum of money left by his deceased daughter Eliza Ann “for evangelizing purposes,” be placed in the hands of the elders of the Bethany church to be used “to employ and send out an evangelist to preach the gospel so many days or weeks as the said interest shall compensate.” In codicil, he added five thousand dollars to this amount to be used by the Bethany church to preach the gospel in Western Virginia and elsewhere. But not one penny did he leave to the American Christian Missionary Society.

How different the whole story of the Restoration might have been, if brethren had adhered to the Bible principles set forth by Alexander Campbell in the *Christian Baptist* when he said of the primitive church: “They dare not transfer to a missionary society, or Bible society, or education society, *a cent or a prayer,* lest in so doing they should rob the church of its glory, and exalt the inventions of men above the wisdom of God. *In their church capacity along they moved*.”20

**Notes**

1*Lard’s Quarterly*, 2/3 (April 1865).

2Garrison, W.E., and A.T. DeGroot. *The Disciples of Christ—A History*.

3Rowe, F.L. *Pioneer Sermons and Addresses.*

4Ibid.

5Ibid.

6Jennings, Walter Wilson. *Origin and Early History of the Disciples of Christ*.

7Garrison and DeGroot. *Disciples*.

8Ibid.

9Ibid.

10Richardson, Robert. *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*.

11Green, William F. *Christian Missions, and Historical Sketches of Missionary Societies among the Disciples of Christ.*

12Ibid.

13*Christian Baptist*, 1823.

14Gates, Errett. *The Story of the Churches*.

15*Millennial Harbinger,* 1850.

16Franklin, Joseph, and J.A. Headington. *The* *Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*.

17Lewis, John T. *The Voice of the Pioneers on Instrumental Music and Societies*.

18*Examination in Chief*.(Newbern, Tenn. Church Trial).

19Lewis. *The Voice of the Pioneers*.

12*Christian Baptist*, 1823.