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The Stone Campbell Movement  
College Press, rev ed 1994

## Chapter 22 The Movement Faces the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

*I have no light to illuminate the pathway of the future save that which falls over my shoulder from the past – Patrick Henry*

Serious concern for renewal of the Stone-Campbell Movement as it faces a new century calls for honest appraisal of the past. What went wrong? What mistakes might the pioneers have made? In what ways might succeeding generations have failed the ideals of the founding fathers? What did the pioneers do that was right, and what can we take with us into the future?

This was, as we have seen, Justin's view of history: hold up for censure what was wrong, preserve and commemorate what was noble. The pioneers themselves would want us to be discriminating in drawing upon their labours. Such a selective use of history should serve us well as we move on toward God's tomorrow

### What went wrong?

Alexander Campbell himself realised as early as 1835 that this "glorious struggle for the restoration of ancient and primitive Christianity" had some serious problems. He referred to them as "the Crisis" that threatened the progress and prosperity of the movement, which he then numbered at 150,000. His analysis of the crisis includes some surprises, not the least of which was that the Movement had come to be seen as "a sort of family quarrel among the Baptists."

He admitted that some of his own people who "have a peculiar controversy with the Baptists" are partly responsible for the misconception. And a misconception it was, Campbell insisted, for the Movement emanated from the Presbyterians, not the Baptists and that the reformation of no one party in Christendom was the original intention of the first advocates of the original gospel and order of things.

Beside being viewed as a fuss among Baptists, the Movement was also seen as having a strong "anticalvirian character" as Campbell put it, which he thought was misleading. Again, he saw some of his own people partly to blame, those who glory in the "anti-calvinistic attitudes". But Campbell insisted that his reformation was no more anti-calvinistic than it was anti-Arminian. Speaking for himself he said there was more of John Calvin in him than James Arminius. In

any event he had no interest in fighting over again the battles between the two. "Let none of our brethren" he urged, "represent this good cause as anti-Arminian or anti-calvinian as making cause with any sect or party in Christendom" He opted for "Bibleism", he avowed, and "against all other *isms* ancient and modern."

Campbell also complained that because of some of the speculations of his people the Movement had been tagged "antitrinitarian". He rejected the description, especially when applied by the Unitarians who saw "a large class of Reformers in the west" as on their side. Campbell insisted that if his Movement was antitrinitarian it was even more antiunitarian. He wanted his people to hold fast to the apostle's doctrine and to be neutral toward all parties and systems.

Another problem Campbell cited was the "liability to extremes", some because of youth and inexperience, some from age and obstinacy. Some read too little, he complained, and some too much! Even more serious was "the phlegmatic temperament" which when coupled with speculative issues, causes much mischief. He emphasized once more that they all knew the bond of union – one Lord, one faith, one baptism – and that speculation must be kept in its place as opinion.

The thing that seemed to bother him most, however, was "the dogmatical, unfeeling and snarling temper" of those who were content to denounce error rather than preach the gospel. He insisted that "the white horse that carries the message of peace" should not be burdened with declamations against societies, cooperatives and the "saddlebags of party politics and political aspirants."<sup>i</sup>

It is to Campbell's credit that he was not blind to the Movement's weaknesses, and that he moved early on to correct them. But the weaknesses he named continued to plague his reformation and finally contributed to the divisions that came.

We have the advantage of a century and a half later as we look at what went wrong and what went right. But it is in the best tradition of Alexander Campbell himself to do this. In placing the weaknesses alongside the strengths we allow history to serve rather than to deter.

1. *It was a unity movement that itself divided again and again, led by separatists.*

It was always and embarrassment to the pioneers that they pled for unity as separatists. Even on his deathbed Campbell expressed regret that they had separated from the Baptists, and Stone equivocated as to whether he had really left the Presbyterians. O'Kelly and Haggard made it clear they were not breaking fellowship with the Methodists. And old Raccoon John Smith insisted he would never leave the Baptists even though they wanted him to!

The fatal irony is that for whatever reasons they were not able to be what they intended: a unity movement within the church at large and not become another denomination. They eventually created an oxymoron, a divided unity movement.

Could they have remained in their churches and worked more effectively for unity? It can be argued, as this book does, that they were forced out and really had no choice. But even if forced out, could they have remained a movement only and not added three more denominations, as they originally were as the Christian Association of Washington?

The fatal tragedy remains that the Movement launched to unite the Christians in all the sects itself divided over and over again. Its heirs must keep this painful fact on the table for study and prayer as they face the future.

2. *An overemphasis on doctrinal particulars to the neglect of universal truths and making those particulars (opinions) tests of fellowship.*

When Robert Richardson wrote his series on "Reformation" back in the 1840's he named this as a weakness of Protestantism that the Movement sought to correct. An overemphasis on doctrinal issues divided Protestantism into warring sects, he charged, and its "general truths" that unite. While noble efforts were made to overcome this weakness, the Movement nonetheless failed to heal the divisions and added even more.

We could have borne particular differences, which as W.E. Garrison noted, have had more to do with methods than doctrines, if they had not been made tests of fellowship. We could have churches that sing acapella only and those that use instruments, churches that support the agencies and societies and those that do not, those that have Sunday Schools and those that do not, those that serve communion in one chalice and those who use multiple cups, etc., etc. and still be a united people, "holding to the Head" who is Christ, bonded by "general Christianity" as Richardson put it. It was not to be.

3. *They fell prey to the common fallacy that there was a golden age of the church, "the primitive church" that was the pattern for all time to come.*

While always resisted by some, there was the naïve assumption that there is an indisputably inspired and authoritative pattern of organisation (polity), doctrine, worship and practice. Still more fatal to the Movement's effectiveness was the implication that others must conform to our understanding of that pattern or "ancient order" if there is to be unity. Our undoing has been that even our own leaders could not interpret "the pattern" alike, much less the church at large.

Recent biblical research has shown that primitive Christianity was far more diverse than the Movement has allowed, and that the early churches were not united in the sense of being copies of each other. It is a myth that there was ever "the ideal pristine church" in the first century that can be restored or transplanted in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. While our pioneers may have eventually realised this, the Movement was never able to free itself of this fallacy.

4. *A failure to balance the tension between two basic motifs of their plea, unity and restoration.*

While the pioneers emphasized unity in their plea, there was the implication, at least early on, that unity is possible only through "a restoration of the ancient order of things." If this was eventually modulated, especially by Alexander Campbell as noted below, it was not sufficient to remove the tension between the two concepts.

This tension is reflected in the divisions that exist today. Those who emphasize restoration tend to neglect unity, those who stress unity have all but denounced restoration. When the Restudy Commission made its report to the International Convention in 1949 (Chapter 17), it named this tension as a basic cause of divisions within the Movement.

The tension is due in part to a difference in interpreting the genius of the Movement. If both motifs have validity, as most leaders have believed, it has been a failure of finding proper balance between the two. A lack of critical examination of the meaning of both unity and restoration has also been part of the problem.

5. *An undue fear of organisation.*

In the early days of the Movement it was easy to be indifferent to structure and organisation, but with age and growth the need for cooperative effort became apparent. We have seen that by the 1830's Campbell considered it imperative to call for cooperation, insisting that the church is more than the total of congregations. He met with opposition that never subsided. Even the loosely structured missionary society almost died. Conservatives have always been suspicious of all organisation, presuming it to be without Biblical authority. This has been an Achilles Heel to the progress of the Movement throughout its history.

6. *An unwanted suspicion of theology.*

It was somehow supposed that theology made creeds and creeds created division. Wiser heads came to see that theologians might create sects, by being pushy, but not theology as such. Nonetheless the Movement became "anti-theological", however theological it actually was. Campbell put a "creed in the deed" when he mandated the charter

of Bethany College that theology could not be taught. They taught “Christian doctrine” instead.

This “anti” posture has made the Movement less theologically responsible than it might have been otherwise. We have felt justified in skirting weighty issues as the sovereignty of God and election on the grounds that they are “theology”. We have thus run the risk of not taking “biblical theology” seriously. Does this account for so much biblical illiteracy in our churches today? Why do our people have to go to such parachurch organisations as the Navigators and Bible Study Fellowship for serious Bible study? Our pioneers, of course cannot be blamed for all of this. While we have always been a Biblical people, we have not been encouraged to think theologically.

7. *A failure to distinguish between a plea for New Testament Christianity and their conception of what that constituted.*

We observed in Chap. 13 that Lancelot Oliver, the British editor, warned against this fallacy, which he thought the Movement had largely avoided. But we have too often left the impression that we draw no distinction between a call for restoration or reformation and our idea of what that means. Oliver noted that we must be ready “to diminish or enlarge as further truth breaks from God’s word”. That is far different from supposing we already have all the truth and there is no reason to invite others to join in the search.

8. *The practice of starting churches and leaving them unnurtured and unattended.*

In the early days the Movement may have grown too fast. Churches were planted at a rapid pace, often with many baptisms. Evangelists felt the need to move on to other fields, leaving new congregations to survive the best they could. This problem was compounded by the absence of organisation and lack of long term planning. This failure to consolidate gains proved costly in that it created too many ill prepared leaders and undernourished churches.

9. *An uncanny inability on the part of the leaders to get along with each other.*

While this plagues all movements and churches to some degree, it has been particularly destructive among us. It is not clear why. We have pointed to the inordinate influence of editor bishops. If power corrupts, as the verdict of history indicates, the editor’s chair in the Stone-Campbell tradition has been corruptive in the early generations. It serves to warn all leaders to be aware of positions of power.

At the same time we have had impressive overtures for peace from editors that were ignored. Both Isaac Errett and James H. Garrison, for

instance, urged the churches not to dispute over societies and music, but for each side to show what method is most effective by excelling in that method. So, we have also had a penchant for ignoring the advice of our wisest minds to our own hurt.

While this may not complete the list of things that went wrong, it is sufficient to point up the wisdom of Cicero when he advised that “any man may make a mistake, but none but a fool will continue in it.”

### A Flawed Plea?

Apart from the foregoing list of things that went wrong, there is the larger question as to whether “the Plea” for unity based upon a restoration of primitive Christianity was valid. The painful fact remains that it did not even work for the Movement itself. The following story points up this problem in a dramatic way.

It concerns a speech made by Peter Ainslie at an ecumenical conference at either Stockholm or Lausanne in 1925 or 1927, before dignitaries of the World Council. Ainslie pleaded for unity on the grounds of all parties abandoning their creeds and ecclesiastical inventions and accept the New Testament as the sole authority in religion. With pride he told of belonging to a people who had abandoned human names and accepted only Christ and the Bible as the basis of union, and enjoyed freedom of matters of opinion. Ainslie earnestly invited all those that made up divided Christendom to unite upon a return to simple New Testament Christianity.

The story has it that the ecclesiastical dignitaries from around the World listened to Ainslie with rapt attention, admiring the sincerity and simplicity of his plea and the eloquence of his presentation. But at last a bearded patriarch broke the silence by asking Ainslie, “and have you never divided?” It was all the rebuttal that was necessary.<sup>ii</sup>

The Disciples who tell the Ainslie story recall that in those days it did not occur to them that there was a flaw to the plea; they only blamed the dissidents for dividing the Movement. It should be evident that we have been naïve and have oversimplified the problem by saying “you come and be like us and there will be unity.” Respondents only need to remind us of our own divisions.

If the plea for unity that is based on “the restoration of New Testament Christianity” is valid, then why are we ourselves who make that plea divided umpteen different ways? If the plea has not worked for us, how

do we figure it will work for others? No unity has ever been effected by such a plea, either for ourselves or for the church at large.

This calls for selectivity in drawing from our heritage in our search for workable unity principles. From our earliest days there were those who based unity only on faithfulness to Christ, according to one's own understanding. The Republican Methodists who in 1794 became the first Christian Church set forth "Christian character" as the only test for church fellowship and membership, as we saw in chapter 3. Barton W Stone likewise made loyalty to Christ the only basis of unity.

It was the Campbells, especially in their earlier years, who pled for unity on the basis of "the ancient order of things" and a restoration of primitive Christianity. In time, however, Alexander Campbell moved toward what he came to call "catholic grounds" for unity. By 1839 he stated that while unity had been a "darling theme" to him all along, it was some time before we could see clearly the ground on which all true Christians could form one visible and harmonious union.<sup>iii</sup>

What he now saw clearly as the basis of unity made no reference to making "primitive Christianity, which, as he came to see, sincere believers interpret differently. He now defined the "rule of union" as: "whatever in faith, in piety and morality is catholic, or universally admitted by all parties, shall be adopted as the basis of union" This he set forth as a resolution before a large audience in Lexington KY in 1841. The audience overwhelmingly approved the resolution by a standing vote. It reflects a dramatic mid course correction in the Campbell's theology of unity.<sup>iv</sup> He may, however, have taken back with one hand what he gave with the other when he went on to call for an abandonment of all tenets, forms and usages not admitted by all as catholic. This may be an instance where we have to be selective, accepting Campbell's first resolution but not the second.

It is ecumenically sound to call for unity on what all believers hold and practice in common, but must they give up any doctrine or practice that is not catholic? The Churches of Christ, for example, should not insist on all other Christians singing acappella as a basis for unity, for this is not catholic, but must it abandon acappella singing in order to be a part of a united church? This would be true of countless "particulars" believed and practiced by all the churches, which they need not be asked to abandon, but only not to make them tests of fellowship.

Campbell may have stated this revised doctrine of unity better two years later when he addressed an educators convention in Clarksburg, VA. In this address he stated that irrespective of sectarian differences there is "a common Christianity" on which all Christian people can

unite. This common faith, he indicated, was based upon common principles of piety and morality.<sup>v</sup>

Had this been Ainslie's plea before the world council – a unity based upon our mutual faith in Christ – would not the response have been different? If this had been our only test for fellowship with each other – would we ever have divided? Is this not to be our plea for unity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

### What was right?

There were things of "worthy action", to quote Tacitus again, that we should not only commemorate, as he advised, but take with us into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, if we have been inclined to repeat the mistakes of the past, the following list may reveal that we have erred even more in not preserving the noblest features of our heritage.

#### 1. *Their passion for unity.*

Whatever failures they had, the pioneers undertook one of the noblest endeavors in the history of the church. They launched a movement to unite all Christians in all the sects. Richardson rightly described it as a movement "born of a passion for unity and unity has been its consuming theme." It was an experience in ecumenicity long before the modern ecumenical movement was born. If the heirs of the Movement fall in this aspect of their heritage, they fall in what was most important.

If Paul Crow is right that even the Disciples of Christ have lost their zeal for unity, as was noted in chapter 20, then it can be said that none of the three churches has that passion for the unity of all Christians that gave birth to the Movement. If in our hearts Christian Unity is no longer our business it will affect our sense of mission as we enter a new century.

"Identity" is the word these days. All three churches are trying to discover or redefine their identity. This has led Independents and Churches of Christ to talk of getting "The Restoration Movement" back on track, while the Disciples speak of how to make "covenant" more meaningful in a restructured church. Is either of these emphases equivalent to once again being a unity movement, or are they calls for a particular ecclesiological identification?

Are we ready to identify ourselves with the way Barton W Stone identified our people in his day: "Let Christian unity be our polar star"?

Such recovery must begin with renewed zeal for prayer for unity.

Some years ago I was impressed with a notice on a wall in Westminster Abbey in London that read: "Prayers for Christian Unity in this chapel each Tuesday at 2pm." If Anglicans set time aside to pray for unity, how much more a people whose heritage is a passion for unity! And yet in most of our congregations there is little said about unity either to people or to God.

2. *Their disdain for and repudiation of division among Christians.*

If we were "sick and tired of the bitter jarrings and janglings of a party spirit" as was Thomas Campbell, and if we believed as did he that "division among Christians is a horrid evil, fraught with many evils", we would be as prone to do something about it as he was. We must come to see what our forebearers saw, that our divisions are a sin. The awful truth is that not only does Christendom at large continue to be divided, but we, called to be a unity movement, continue to divide and sub divide. In every decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we have added still another faction or have had one in the making.

If we could see as did Peter Ainslie that a divided church, especially our own divided Movement, is a "scandal" before the world, we would no longer accept it as tolerable. If in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we Americans solve the problem of crime in our streets and schools by treating it as intolerable, we who are heirs of the Stone Campbell Movement will solve our internal divisions in the same way. We must be resolute that some things, like random crime and church splits, are intolerable. Campbell and Ainslie loathed division. We must be similarly impassioned.

So, along with praying more for unity we should repent more for our partisan behavior. If we did not create the factions we have been tolerant of them and have preserved them without serious concern. If there could be an occasional "Reconciliation Sunday", with participants from all our factions, in which we boldly confess our sin of being a divisive people, it might well set in motion the healing that must come.

3. *Their view of the church as inherently and essentially one.*

After all our study we may conclude that the most famous quotation outside the Bible in our history is Thomas Campbell's "The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one." We learned in chapter 5 that when Campbell wrote that in the *Declaration and Address* he did not yet have a congregation of his

own, and yet he spoke of "the Church of Christ" as a reality upon earth.

He thus had no illusion of "restoring" the true church as if it did not exist. He was also well aware of, even incensed by, all the divisions among Christians, and yet he referred to the essential unity of the church, as if it cannot be divided.

It is well that we remind ourselves, in the light of Paul's "Is Christ divided?", that to speak of a divided church is a contradiction, an oxymoron. The church as the Body of Christ is by its very nature one. What then mean the divisions? They are encroachments upon the Body of Christ, not unlike carbuncles on a physical body or the surface of a ship. Divisions may be likened to the festering sores in a troubled marriage. The couple is still one in holy matrimony, but their oneness is not being realized.

That is the way Ronald Osborne once put it "Unity is real but it is not realized." We can move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a better handle on the problem if we see, as did Campbell and Paul, the church in the world is one and cannot be other than one. We must learn to behave as people who are one in Christ.

Our task therefore is not to achieve unity through various ecumenical exercises, but to realize the unity that is already ours. It thus becomes a matter of accepting the gift of the Spirit's unity. We might therefore better heal our divisions with a new approach, such as "let's accept the gift."

4. *They were people of principles, not only moral but pragmatic.*

Our founding fathers were principled, not only in the exemplary lives they lived, but in that they thought in principles. They formulated principles of unity and fellowship and gave pragmatic expression to them in slogans. The founding documents are replete with principles, which have the advantage of transcending time and circumstance. They did not bother with rules, fads or even theological deductions. They worked from principles wrought out of the long experience of the church.

The Campbellian view of the catholicity of the church, Stones coupling of unity and evangelism, Scott's theme of the golden oracle, and Haggard's plea for unity in the name Christian are examples of this. Sometimes a principle was expressed humorously as well as pragmatically, as in *The Last Will and Testament*: "We will that preachers and people pray more and

dispute less.” That principle would serve us well for all time to come.

5. *Their concern for ordinances in the life and worship of the church.*  
They had a sacramental view toward the ordinances – Baptism, Communion, The Lord’s Day – in that they are not only commands but also means of grace: Alexander Campbell also viewed the Bible as an ordinance, for it too is something the church does, through study and interpretation, in response to God’s grace. The church not only gathers around the Lord’s Table on the Lord’s Day but also around an open Bible.  
Baptism, which Campbell saw as a work of grace, inducts one into the fellowship, while Communion is a continual expression of that fellowship. They were not “church ordinances” as much as they were ordinances of God. If we are true to our heritage in this regard, we will not always take the ordinances seriously but see them in reference to God’s grace.
  
6. *In taking the Bible seriously, their preaching was biblical and authoritative.*  
They unashamedly built congregations “upon the Bible”, and their preaching was grounded in the authority of Scripture. They especially emphasized what they called “the facts of the Bible” rather than their own opinions and deductions. Authoritative, biblical preaching is thus our heritage.  
Authoritative preaching may not be easily defined, but we all recognize it when we witness it. It has to do with making the Scriptures relevant, causing the hearer to respond with something like “This is about me and my world.” It must also project the authority of God: *God speaks through the preaching*. There is a sense of urgency in such preaching. The preacher projects the truth of God, not himself or herself, and the truth, even when spoken in love, may have a bite to it. Authoritative preaching subdues and chastens as well as builds up and encourages. It always provides hope.  
Such preaching is also direct and specific in its exposure of sin, such as sexism or racial injustice, and does not dally in generalities. It does not merely declaim external truths but makes them meaningful by placing them in their contemporary context. It speaks to the life experiences of the congregation.

In authoritative preaching the Bible is used to show that there are objective and personal moral standards, however contrary this may be to the mentality of today’s Western society. Above all it always proclaims the gospel of God’s love in Christ for all people, and shows that in the gospel God demands justice for all.

In his study of Disciples preaching, Joseph E Faulkner found few instances of this kind of preaching. Only 5% of the 208 sermons analyzed dealt with social justice in any forthright manner. They seemed to be little aware of the complexity and moral ambiguity of the daily life struggles faced by the congregation. While he found the sermons overwhelmingly doctrinal in nature, there was more declamation than analytical explanation. There is a hunger for relevant biblical interpretation that is not being met.

Faulkner found that the preachers largely ignored the Old Testament showing little interest in its great narrative stories, and even less for the indignation at social injustice expressed by the eighth century prophets. Even the illustrations, which often did little to enhance the theme, had little relevance to people’s lives.<sup>vi</sup>

There is no reason to suppose that the sermons preached in the other two churches of the Movement would be any different if subjected to a similar analysis. In fact, in one recent publication Churches of Christ scholars concluded that “With the adoption of secular fads and the rush to meet an ever expanding array of ‘needs’, Churches of Christ are loading their biblical case and becoming confused about what human beings really need.”<sup>vii</sup>

If our churches have “lost their biblical base” we are ill prepared to minister to the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We must take theology seriously and be urgent in preaching the gospel if we are to reach the vast “unaffiliated sector” that is out there. This means we will have to know the needs of the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in all their complexity, and then address the word of God to those needs. Perhaps this is what Alexander Campbell meant at the outset when he talked about a church built upon the Bible.

7. *They connected with each other and with their world.*  
They were a pioneer church on the American frontier, and they were part of that frontier, building a new nation as well as a new church. They were adventurers, in ideas, in principles, in unity. They not only launched a unity movement but effected a union between themselves. We have seen that Barton W Stone considered the union of his movement with that of Campbell’s as

the noblest act of his life. It was also a noble example for the church at large, anticipating modern ecumenicity. They took the necessary pragmatic steps to make the union work.

They were involved with the issues of their day, whether slavery, politics of business. They followed the frontier west, editing papers, organizing schools and building colleges. They were the people, a people's church, an American church. Within a single generation they became from scratch a sizable and respected Christian denomination, involved in its world and the church at large.

If we are today an irrelevant and disconnected people, we are at odds with our own heritage.

### **Other Changes for a New Century**

Leaders throughout the three churches speak of the need for change, some of which are deemed imperative for survival. Some are pragmatic in nature, matters of expediency rather than matters of faith. Since they threaten long standing tradition they are controversial. Some are more serious, questioning the integrity of our faith. There is a general agreement that we are in crisis and that we must meet the challenge of a changing world if we as Christ's church are to be the pillar and ground of truth.

#### **1. Spirituality**

Our forebearers believed the church is to be holy as much as it is to be one. Thomas Campbell not only saw the church as essentially one, but as consisting of those who believe in and obey Christ, and that "manifest the same by their tempers and conduct" He insisted that "none else can be truly and properly called Christians." Alexander Campbell believed that reformation must first be personal, manifest in the heart and life of the believer, before it can be ecclesial. Barton W Stone placed "fire unity" above either book, head or water unity, referring to the Spirit's presence in the life of the believer.

These were men of prayer and personal holiness. The old Scottish Presbyterian piety burned within them, expressing itself in the family circle. They saw education of the heart as important as education of the mind.

The dull, cold orthodoxy that characterizes so much of modern Protestantism, including many of our own churches, must be rejected as sub Christian. In a day when in our own nation in the

last 30 years there has been a 500 percent increase in violent crime and a 400 percent increase in illegitimate births, the church must take a lead in building moral and spiritual values.

#### **2. *Biblical Literacy.***

If the Stone-Campbell people were once known as "people of the Book" and grounded in "sound doctrine", there is a question whether it is still the case. Roger Carstensen found such an abysmal ignorance of Bible basics among Disciples of Christ that he founded an agency whose mission is to stamp out biblical illiteracy among those churches. Leaders among Christian Churches and Churches of Christ have long complained that their people, especially the youth, are almost as biblically illiterate as the unchurched. Serious Bible study in our churches is all too rare, which may help explain the success of parachurch organizations that have moved in to fill this need.

Our people must be grounded in sound doctrine, the basic truths of the Christian faith, and be able to articulate it and defend it. There are of course marginal issues where we will differ among ourselves, but upon the central issues there can be no compromise. If we believe that Christianity is true, we must be prepared to give honest answers to honest questions. We must once again be a people who believes something.

#### **3. *Polity and organization***

If the Disciples have better positioned themselves to do something as a church through restructure, it is not the case with the independents and Churches of Christ, both of which are in crisis over ineffective organization or no organization at all. Both are hampered by rigid congregationalism.

Even at the local level there is no clearly defined polity, and congregations are left to make policy as they go along. It is imperative that these churches rise above the mentality that organization is wrong.

Imagine some 17,000 congregations, mostly small, that make up these two denominations, that have no effective structure through which to pool their resources! Behind this incredible lack of responsibility is the myth that such radical localism is mandated in the New Testament.

4. *Ministry of Women*

This issue imposes itself on virtually every denomination, including the Roman Catholics, and there is no indication that it will go away. It is an issue of whether the whole church is to be involved in public ministry or whether there is to be a gender test. Throughout the Movement, especially among Independents and Churches of Christ, both leadership and public worship is male dominated.

Some 60% of the congregation is barred to serve because of sex. Again, this is supposedly mandated by the New Testament, but one is forced to be very selective in his use of Scripture to conclude that gender is a test for ministry.

Some bold leaders are conceding that it is tradition pure and simple, drawn from sexism in our pagan culture. Many are persuaded that unless we get with it and implement the biblical principle that in Christ there is neither male nor female we will pay dearly for our parochialism in the complex world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

5. *Worship and Body Life*

We must face the reality that our services are often boring, even to ourselves. Our people often attend out of duty or because they are good sports. Not only must there be more relevant biblical preaching, as noted above, but there must be a sense of urgency, excitement, and meaning in the entire service. Some congregations have innovative singing, interpretative readings, sharing time in which there is real Body Life, and thus create an atmosphere of "the presence of the Spirit." They no longer neglect the emotional dimension of worship.

These churches must be looked to as leading the way rather than being ignored or criticized. When a church is growing because of an exciting, innovative program, others should "go and see" and be challenged to make similar changes. If we are to be around for the next century we must find ways to overcome our casual, matter of fact approach to religion.

6. *Instrumental Music*

This longtime controversial issue is no longer an issue, and the divisive debates are a thing of the past. But more needs to happen in order to lay the issue to rest once for all. It would be helpful if the Churches of Christ would go on record, preferably by public statements, that it has changed its longstanding position on this issue. Not that it is wrong not to use instrumental music, but to

have made an issue of it all these years, even to the point of judging others as unfaithful Christians if they sing with an instrument.

If this position were publicly repudiated throughout the Churches of Christ, it would have a great healing effect, and it would encourage the present membership to believe that meaningful change is in the offing, most of whom see nothing wrong with instruments. We can take heart that some statements to this effect have been made.

It is not true, as some think, that Churches of Christ must become instrumental if it survives and grows, for some congregations are finding effective ways to improve acappella singing. When these changing churches have a "special music" they sometimes use soundtracks in deference to those who would be offended by visible instruments. And some acappella singing is so innovative that it sounds as if instruments are being used.

7. *Sectarianism*

After all these years the sectarian spirit continues to dog the Movement, with more divisions impending. We have seen that fundamentalism is threatening the peace of both the Independents and the Disciples. Churches of Christ, on the other hand, is far from overcoming "the only true church" mentality that has long tainted its witness, though progress has been made.

Sectarianism must be exposed for what it is, a sin against God and the church. The antidote is the longsuffering of Christ, that we accept each other on the same basis that Christ accepted us. As Christ accepted his own chosen disciples in spite of their differences, the church must accept all believers as equals, allowing for diversity. We as a people have a future only insofar as we resolve once for all to put sectarianism behind us.

8. *Modern Biblical Scholarship.*

This is certain to continue to be a lively issue among us in the upcoming generation, one reason being the progress we have made in recent years in coming to terms with the nature of the Bible. Since there can be no turning back there will be tensions. It helps to realize that every denomination has been affected by a liberal/conservative gap. We can bridge such a gap by not thinking of being either liberal or conservative, but in simply being honest with the Bible. If we are truly biblical we will not make claims for the Bible that it does not make for itself.

And if we follow Alexander Campbell's hermeneutics of interpreting the Bible by the same rules we interpret any other book, we will not ignore modern biblical scholarship. A truth seeker before any open Bible has nothing to fear from scholarship and much to gain.

9. *Our destiny must be: to cease to exist as a church or denomination by sinking into union with the Body of Christ at large.*

This is our heritage. It is who we are, a people hopeful of losing their identity as a separate denomination in a union with the church at large. We must leave it in God's hand as to what form such a unity will take or how long it will take. He will use us in answering the prayer of Christ for the unity of all believers.

This principle of "emptying ourselves" for the unity of the whole church is what gave us birth in the Movement of Barton W Stone. In chapter 4 we learned that great line from *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*: "Let this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large."

It is our calling to keep this dream alive, however remote it may seem. We must not "settle in" as a denomination or denominations, as if our own preservation were our mission. We must cultivate an "in the meantime" approach to ongoing history. In the meantime we are going to be what W E Garrison called "a pilot project for a completely united church."

In the meantime we will be intelligent and responsible Christians, cooperating with other believers in reaching out into a troubled world. In the meantime we will seek for meaningful growth through viable missions. In the meantime we will work and pray for unity among ourselves and others, seeking to become a model of what the united church would be like.

But we must remain conscious that this is all "in the meantime". Down the road, someday, in God's tomorrow and in God's own way, we will cease to exist as a separate people. We will gladly "Let this body die" so as to rise in union with the Body of Christ catholic. Beyond that is still a greater end, the conversion of the world, for according to the prayer of Jesus it is only a united church that will win a lost world.

Really believing this into the 21<sup>st</sup> century – praying and preaching about it and it up as our mission – will not only make us true to our heritage but a blessing to the world.

This means we will be a cruciform church, a people formed by the Cross by being crucified with Christ. The cross will be both our

witness and the source of our unity. As we are drawn to the Cross we will be drawn to each other.

Now that this history is complete it is for the reader to judge as to whether we have fulfilled Alexander Campbell's expectations of such a history as expressed back in 1840:

Whenever the history of this effort at reformation shall have been faithfully written, it will appear, we think, bright as the sun, that our career has been marked with a spirit of forbearance, moderation, a love for union, with an unequivocal desire for preserving the integrity, harmony, and cooperation of all those who teach one Lord, one faith, and one immersion.<sup>viii</sup>

A love for union? Bright as the sun? Indeed!  
The torch has been passed.

<sup>i</sup> Alexander Campbell "The Crisis" *Millennial Harbinger*, 1835, pp 5951

<sup>ii</sup> Ronald R Osborn tells this story in *Disciples and the Universal Church*, Nashville, Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1967, p59.

<sup>iii</sup> Alexander Campbell, "Union of Christians – No 1," *Millennial Harbinger*, 1839, p212.

<sup>iv</sup> Union Christian Meeting, *Millennial Harbinger*, 1841, p259.

<sup>v</sup> Alexander Campbell, "An address", *Millennial Harbinger*, 1841, p445.

<sup>vi</sup> Joseph E Faulkner, "What are they Saying?" A Content Analysis of 208 Sermons Preached in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1988", *A Case Study of Modern Protestantism*, Edited by D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, pp 416-?

<sup>vii</sup> Leonard Allen, Richard T Hughes, Michael R Weed, *The Worldly Church* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1991) p97

<sup>viii</sup> Alexander Campbell, "The Editor's Response to Mr Broadus," *Millennial Harbinger*, 1840, p556.