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Notes on Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address

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The Declaration and Address*

Jay Smith

On May 13, 1807, Thomas Campbell arrived in Philadelphia, Pa. from Ahory, Armaugh County, Ireland. He was a minister of the Old Light, Anti-Burgher, Seceder, Presbyterian Church, and, upon presenting his credentials to the Seceder Synod of North America (then in session at Philadelphia), he was assigned to the Presbytery of Chartiers of Pittsburgh and vicinity.¹

The Seceder Presbyterians were, even for that day, one of the most exclusive minded of religious bodies. When the Scottish and Irish Presbyterian Church had been splitting into Seceders and Non-seceders, Burghers and Anti-burghers, New Lights and Old Lights, in the late 1700's and early 1800's, Thomas Campbell was sent by his church to Glasgow in 1805 to help bring unity to the different Seceder bodies.²

His practice in America was in keeping with his principles. Campbell offered communion to members of other Presbyterian bodies—most of whom were without ministers in this frontier area—and he was soon censured by his Presbytery. Campbell's name was before the Chartiers' Presbytery and the Synod of North America several times the following year. A careful reading of the proceedings of these two bodies indicates that his convictions were well thought out and based upon a direct appeal to scripture rather than just being a simple-minded gesture of kindness as often interpreted.³ Many of the charges of heresy brought against him in the Synod are almost verbatim statements of affirmations in the *Declaration and Address* published later. On Sept. 13, 1808 he withdrew from both the Presbytery and Synod, and the Synod withdrew from him the following May.⁴

Thomas Campbell continued to preach in the homes of friends in the Washington, Pa. area until the next summer on August 17, 1809 when they formed themselves into "The Christian Association of Washington." This body was not a church but only a society for the promotion of Christian unity.⁵ Members of the society were expected to remain in their own churches and work for reformation.⁶

*A paper read at the Biblical Forum at the Abilene Christian Lectures, February, 1961.

¹DeGroot, A. T., *The Disciples of Christ—A History* (St. Louis, Bethany Press, 1948), p. 130.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 126f. The story of Thomas Campbell's adventure in unity before coming to America is interestingly told in McAlester's *Thomas Campbell: Man of the Book*.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 130-139.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁵Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1960, reprint), p. 25.

⁶DeGroot, *Op. Cit.*, p. 140.

The *Declaration and Address*, which set forth the intentions of the association, was read and approved to be printed on Sept. 7, 1809⁷ and came from the press later that fall.⁸

Almost two years ago this writer spoke at Bethany College, Bethany, W. Va. at the 150th "birthday commemoration" of the *Declaration and Address*. When Dr. Thomas suggested I read a short paper on it in the *Biblical Forum*, I confidently intended only to brush up the old speech a little, but, last fall, upon restudying the document, a discovery was made which may have been obvious to others all along but was startling to me.

We will treat the *Declaration and Address* under three headings: the first will demonstrate the overall purpose of the document, the second its method or programme for achieving that purpose and the third will evaluate the purpose and method proposed in the document against the thought and practice of the Churches of Christ and the Disciples of Christ (Christian) church of today. It is in this third section that my "discovery" will be considered.

Purpose

The purpose of the *Declaration and Address* is stated in one word—"unity." This purpose is shouted on every page. The disunity of Christendom is seen as the greatest problem of Christianity. Let us note some of the stronger expressions of this purpose.

Division among the Christians is a horrid evil, fraught with many evils. It is antichristian, as it destroys the visible unity of the body of Christ; as if he were divided against himself, excluding and excommunicating a part of himself. It is anti-scriptural, as being strictly prohibited by his sovereign authority; a direct violation of his express command. It is anti-natural, as it excited Christians to condemn to hate, and oppose one another, who are bound by the highest and most endearing obligations to love each other as brethren, even as Christ has loved them. In a word, it is productive of confusion and of every evil work.⁹

The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, internationally, 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, and of none else; as none else can be truly and properly called Christians.¹⁰

Unite with us in the common cause of simple evangelical Christianity; in this glorious cause we are ready to unite with you. United we shall prevail. It is the cause of Christ, and

⁷West, Earl I., *The Search for the Ancient Order* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1957), Vol. I, p. 49.

⁸It has been reprinted many times and is now available in an enlarged print, paperback edition from the Bethany Press for \$1.00. *Documents Advocating Christian Union* (Old Paths Reprint) also contains it along with a number of other important treatises. F. D. Kershner's *The Christian Union Overtures* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1923) contains the text along with a fine commentary.

⁹Campbell, *Op. Cit.*, p. 47.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 44.

our brethren throughout all the Churches, of catholic unity, peace, and purity; a cause that must finally prosper in spite of all opposition. Let us unite to promote it.¹¹

There is hardly a line in the whole writing that does not exhibit this intense desire for unity.

Method

Thomas Campbell maintained that the only method of restoring peace and unity to divided Christendom was by a direct appeal to the Bible as the only standard of faith and practice. At one of the preliminary meetings prior to the actual forming of the Christian Association, Thomas Campbell enunciated the motto, "Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent," and this statement was accepted by the group as their watchword.¹² Again, let us quote from the *Declaration and Address* itself:

Our desire, therefore, for ourselves and our brethren would be, that, rejecting human opinions and the inventions of men as of any authority, or as having any place in the Church of God, we might forever cease from further contentions about such things; returning to and holding fast by the original standard; taking the Divine word alone for our rule . . .¹³

Dearly beloved brethren, why should we deem it a thing incredible that the Church of Christ, in this highly favored country, should resume that original unity, peace, and purity which belong to its constitution, and constitute its glory: Or, is there anything that can be justly deemed necessary for this desirable purpose, both to conform to the model and adopt the practice of the primitive Church, expressly exhibited in the New Testament? Whatever alterations this might produce in any or in all of the Churches, should, we think, neither be deemed inadmissible nor ineligible. Surely such alteration would be every way for the better, and not for the worse, unless we should suppose the divinely inspired rule to be faulty, or defective. Were we, then in our Church constitution and managements, to exhibit a complete conformity to the apostolic Church, would we not be, in that respect, as perfect as Christ intended we should be? And should not this suffice us?¹⁴

Who, then, would not be the first among us to give up human inventions in the worship of God, and to cease from imposing his private opinions upon his brethren, that our breaches might *thus* be healed? Who would not willingly conform to the original pattern laid down in the New Testament, for *this* happy purpose?¹⁵

. . . That, thus disentangled from the accruing embarrassments of intervening ages, we may stand with evidence upon the same ground on which the Church stood at the beginning.¹⁶

Nothing ought to be received into the faith or worship of the Church, or be made a term of communion among Christians, that is not as old as the New Testament.¹⁷

Evaluation

We have noted that to Thomas Campbell, unity is the objective—the point of primary importance. His method of achieving unity

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹²*West, Op. Cit.*, p. 47.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 46.

is to find a common basis of faith and practice in the New Testament and to restore the church to that divine pattern there exhibited. Unity is the objective—restoration the method.

These two poles represent the "philosophy" of this document. Any different arrangement of ideas will represent a different outlook. Since it is not a "holy document," there is no reason why we must agree with it, but it is instructive to note the alignment of ideas.

The Disciples have preserved the unity objective fully as wholeheartedly as Thomas Campbell expressed it. As a consequence, they have become leaders in the present-day Ecumenical Movement. A prominent Disciple said of the Denver Convention a couple of years ago that his was the "only church that could meet and seriously debate its own right to exist as a separate organization." At the International Convention in Louisville, Ky. last October, one speaker (Dr. Roy G. Ross) expressed the need for finding "within the Ecumenical structure a common basis of church membership whereby people may flow freely from church to church with a sense of integrity."¹⁸

But, while seeking unity, the main body of the Disciples (omitting the "Independents") have forsaken Campbell's *method* of "restoration" as the means to achieve that unity. A recent book, entitled *The Restoration Principle* by A. T. DeGroot of Texas Christian University, traces the ideal of restoration in all of its manifestations from sub-apostolic times till the present, but the author feels that it is only legitimate to restore broad principles of religion and not a specific pattern for the church.¹⁹ In the same Louisville convention (mentioned above) there were philippics spurning "echoes of outgrown slogans; echoes of pompous fools long dead!"²⁰ Or again, "But we today recognize that even the New Testament is a product of a foreign culture of a long past age and reflects customs and even ideas that are not only not pertinent today, but also in some cases inimical to human needs and thus surely to God's will."²¹

While the Disciples preserve the objective of unity, most of them (as we have seen) have frankly forsaken restoration by an appeal to Scripture as the only method of achieving it. The only remaining method of unity was anticipated by Campbell in these words, ". . . if no such Divine and adequate basis of union can be fairly exhibited . . . there would, upon this supposition, remain no other way of accomplishing it, but merely by voluntary compromise, and good-natured accommodation."²²

Members of the Churches of Christ, on the other hand, have endeavored to preserve the method—that is, a vigorous and thorough-

¹⁸*The Christian Standard*, Vol. XCV (Nov. 26, 1960), No. 48, p 765.

¹⁹DeGroot, A. T., *The Restoration Principle* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1960), pp. 14, 23, 134ff especially.

²⁰*The Christian Standard*, *Op. Cit.*

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Campbell, *Op. Cit.*, p. 38.

going restoration of the New Testament order of things. Some might think we have merely switched ends of the proposition and have made restoration more important than unity. Unity *has* decreased in importance, but the difference of our stance from that of Thomas Campbell is more fundamental. We have preserved his method, but we have a different objective! This is the discovery that surprised me. It was not what Thomas Campbell said that surprised me, it was his total ignoring of a subject which I had been "reading into" the document.

Restoration is not preached among us primarily for the purpose of uniting the religious world, but as the only valid means of salvation. In other words, we feel that without the Gospel restored to its N. T. purity salvation is impossible. To be sure, we still feel that unity is desirable and would come as a *result* of a return to N. T. practice by all; but salvation is the real objective; and disunity is preferable to risking salvation.

The question of restoring the purity of N. T. teaching to insure salvation is not raised in the *Declaration and Address* at all. It might be argued that this is assumed, but, in view of his line of reasoning, no evidence of it is to be found. It is disunity which destroys souls. Because of division

. . . the truly religious of all parties are grieved, the weak stumbled, the graceless and profane hardened, the mouths of infidels opened to blaspheme religion, and thus the only thing under heaven divinely efficacious to promote and secure the present spiritual and eternal good of man, even the Gospel of blessed Jesus, is reduced to contempt, while multitudes, deprived of a Gospel ministry, as has been observed, fall an easy prey to seducers, and so become the dupes of almost unheard-of delusions.²³

In the appendix, Campbell has a long defense of his practice of not judging others and his opposition to the party spirit which consigned to Hell all who do not adhere to the teaching and practice of each certain group.²⁴

It has become commonplace among those who discuss the Restoration Movement to speak of the twin objectives—restoration and unity—as being incompatible. That is to say, it is explained, that if one seeks to restore the church he will ultimately have to disassociate himself from those who do not or will not attempt to restore the N. T. pattern; otherwise he will have to compromise the absolute demand for uniformity of doctrine. This analysis is correct as far as it goes, but it leaves a number of things unsaid. For example, it ignores the balance in which Campbell held these two concepts, and it fails to note that Campbell left room for private opinions.²⁵

Every sincere and upright Christian will understand and do the will of God, in every instance, to the best of his skill and

²³*Ibid.*, p. 29f.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 69-75.

²⁵"We dare not, therefore, patronize the rejection of God's children, because they may not be able to see alike in matters of human inference." *Ibid.*, p. 61.

judgment; but in the application of the general rule to particular cases there may, and doubtless will, be some variety of opinion and practice. This, we see, was actually the case in the apostolic Churches, without any breach of Christian unity.²⁶

The quintessence of Thomas Campbell's thought on this last subject is summed up in the statement attributed to him (and being a rephrasing of a previous statement by Rupertus Meldinius); "In essentials unity; in non essentials liberty; in all things charity."²⁷

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been neither to draw conclusions nor deal with the minute points of the *Declaration and Address* in an exhaustive fashion. Its purpose has been to delineate the two prominent concepts of the document, and to indicate its similarities and dissimilarities with current thought and practice. A careful study of the *Declaration and Address* might provide some insights and beginning places for fruitful discussion of the factors which not only separated the Christian Church from the Churches of Christ some years ago, but are now tending to redivide the Lord's church. The whole vexing problem of the extent to which uniformity of doctrine is to be demanded was the same question that was troubling churches 150 years ago.

But, note again, the *Declaration and Address* proposes Christian unity on the basis of restored N. T. practice by direct appeal to the N. T. as the only standard of faith and practice. The Disciples have preserved the objective of unity; we the method of restoration. Most Disciples have abandoned restoration as a method and seek unity on the basis of broad religious principles and toleration rather than a resolution of differences. We on the other hand, have salvation as the prime objective of restoration, and unity as secondary and the natural result of a restored oneness of doctrine.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 64.

²⁷West, *Op. cit.*, p. 49.