

1-1-1999

## "Strict Constructionism" and "Loose Constructionism" in Restoration History

James B. North

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

North, James B. (1999) "'Strict Constructionism' and 'Loose Constructionism' in Restoration History," *Leaven*: Vol. 7: Iss. 4, Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol7/iss4/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized administrator of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [Kevin.Miller3@pepperdine.edu](mailto:Kevin.Miller3@pepperdine.edu).

# “Strict Construction” & “Loose Construction” in Restoration History

BY JAMES B. NORTH

The early days of the Restoration movement overlapped the early formative years of the new American republic. Many were the influences of the latter that shaped the development of the former. In the fourth proposition of his *Declaration and Address*, Thomas Campbell likened the authority of the New Testament over the New Testament church to that of a constitution. Since the Constitution had gone into effect in the United States only twenty years before Campbell penned those words, such imagery was vivid and compelling. The frontier of the first half of the nineteenth century sprouted names for places that were borrowed from classical history. Those areas still abound with such names as Syracuse, Athens, Memphis, Argos, Sparta, Rome, and Utica.

This penchant for going back to the classical world for naming places is congruent with the concept of the Restoration movement—going back to the early model of the New Testament church to discern the pattern of church organization and activity that should guide the church in the present. Historians refer to this concept as “primitivism.” The Restoration movement is not alone in its emphasis on such primitive attributes. Anabaptists, Mormons, Holiness groups, and others share this same concern.

All of this is one reason why the Restoration movement was so popular on the American frontier of the early nineteenth century. It fit hand in glove with the ideology that was so common in that place at that time. The movement to restore the church to its New Testament model was part and parcel of the larger mindset

that wished to return to the simpler social and political framework of the early Greek democracies and the Roman republic. But the halcyon days of primitivist idealization were not to last forever. By the mid-nineteenth century, significant tensions had crept into the restorationist camp. It is easy to attribute those tensions to a number of factors, all of which have their defenders. It is the position of this paper to suggest, however, that the tensions were another reflection of the ideological mindset that gave birth to the movement in the first place. In 1809 Thomas Campbell stated the motto that became all but definitive for the movement: “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.”<sup>1</sup> That motto served the early movement well as the leaders focused on the necessity of biblical authority for the essentials of church doctrine, practice, and organization. But by midcentury, numerous issues had come up that created a great deal of disturbance. One of the first such issues was the development of societies. In his early years as editor of the *Christian Baptist*, Alexander Campbell had strongly attacked all “unauthorized societies” of the churches.<sup>2</sup> Campbell placed his article “The Christian Religion” as the very first article in the first issue of the *Christian Baptist*. In talking of the early apostolic churches, Campbell declared:

Their churches were not fractured into missionary societies, Bible societies, education societies; nor did they dream of organizing such in the world. ... 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.<sup>3</sup>

This position became standard in the early days of Alexander Campbell's leadership. When he endorsed the creation of the American Christian Missionary Society as well as the General Convention, both of which formed in 1849, he was severely attacked by many brethren who were still committed to the position he had enunciated in 1823. The controversy over missionary societies became one of the great debates that lasted for decades.

*The movement to restore the church to its New Testament model was part and parcel of the larger mindset that wished to return to the simpler social and political framework of the early Greek democracies and the Roman republic.*

---

A second issue had to do with paying the salary of a full-time preacher. On the frontier in the early days, such did not exist. The churches got along with part-time preachers, weekend preachers, circuit riding preachers, or elders who simply filled the pulpit as needed. In 1831 Alexander Campbell stated, "To employ men to preach the gospel in a Christian congregation is a satire upon that congregation which employs them."<sup>4</sup>

By midcentury, however, the situation had changed drastically, particularly in the larger towns. In the rural areas farmers lived on a subsistence economy, and their churches had no money to pay salaries. But in the cities people were paid cash for their jobs, and they could contribute money to a church that could collect enough to pay a minister's salary. Some rural congregations referred to this as the "one-man pastor system," but by 1850 the church at Eighth and Walnut in Cincinnati had D. S. Burnet as its minister, and within a few years Isaac Errett was so employed by the church in Warren, Ohio.<sup>5</sup> The practice spread, even though the controversy continued for additional decades.

These two issues were somewhat of the lead-in to the major controversy that shook the Restoration movement in the last half of the nineteenth century. That issue was, of course, the use of musical instruments to accompany congregational singing. It is probably not necessary to detail here the background and development of the issue. Suffice it to say that the strife that began at Midway, Kentucky, in 1859 soon reached epidemic proportions. The come-outer spirit displayed in the Sand Creek Declaration in 1889 and David Lipscomb's willingness to secure a separate listing in the U.S. Census in 1906 were only the frosting on the cake of ideological division that had been building over the previous several decades.

These are three of the significant issues that created friction within the Restoration movement by the latter half of the nineteenth century. It is the contention of this paper, however, that these issues should not be treated separately, for they have a great deal in common. All three are reflections of an ideological mindset that was rooted in the constitutional debates at the end of the previous century. The real issues here are parallel to the arguments raised in the late eighteenth century over how to interpret the new U.S. Constitution.

When the Constitution went into effect, everybody in the country was willing to accept it as the new law of the land. But the political tensions between the "Hamiltonians" and the "Jeffersonians" soon manifested themselves in the polarity between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists. Both sides accepted the authority of the Constitution; that was never really in doubt. But the question was how the new Constitution was to be applied.

The first hot issue was Hamilton's recommendation to create a U.S. Bank. He could marshal very good reasons why such a bank was necessary. It could receive the surplus money from the national treasury. It could loan those funds out, thus keeping federal money in circulation and stimulating the economy; it could print paper money based on those deposits, thus providing a sound and stable national currency.

The Jeffersonians, however, were appalled at the prospect. Such a national bank would work against the state banks that were then receiving excess federal income. It could become a monopoly that would crush the independent state banks, which in turn could begin

an erosion of state liberties overcome by the national financial control of the directors of such a bank.

When asked for his opinion on the bank issue, Jefferson wrote to President Washington that there was no specific authorization in the Constitution for a national bank. He argued that all powers not given to the federal government were reserved to the states, as indicated in the Bill of Rights' Tenth Amendment, about to be ratified at the time. Thus Jefferson argued for a "strict construction" of constitutional authority.

Hamilton, on the other hand, argued for a "loose construction," or a "broad" construction of the same authority. He argued that Congress was responsible for national trade and money policy; therefore, a national bank was necessary to regulate the amount of money in circulation. Since the Constitution gave Congress the power to regulate trade, it implied as well the power to set up a national bank as a means to accomplish the constitutional end.

In essence, these were the same arguments used in the controversial issues facing the Restoration movement. And appropriately so, for they reflected the same ideological presuppositions. Both sides in the Restoration movement agreed that the Bible (more specifically, the New Testament) was authoritative. The question was then how to interpret this constitutional authority. Should it be strict construction, or should it be loose construction?<sup>6</sup>

In the arguments for organized societies, particularly missionary societies, one side contended that evangelism and missions certainly were the responsibility of the church. If a missionary agency helped the church to carry out its mission, then the authority for such an agency was "implied" in the basic missions directive to the church. The other side countered with the observation that the New Testament does not specifically authorize such an agency; therefore, creating such an organization was going beyond the authority. Further, instituting something the scriptures did not authorize was compromising the apostolic structure of the church by creating religious agencies without authorization.

Similar arguments could be made on the issue of a located minister and musical instruments in the churches. One side said it was unauthorized; the other said it was allowed. Thomas Campbell, in Proposition Thirteen of his *Declaration and Address*, had stated that

if anything "indispensably necessary to the observance of Divine ordinances be not found upon the page of express revelation," such could be adopted under the title of human expedients. Both sides could then quote Campbell. One side could explain that the developments in question were allowable expedients; the other could argue that they were not "indispensably necessary."

It was this mindset of strict versus loose construction that led to the division between the Christian Church/Churches of Christ and the Churches of Christ fellowships. Missionary societies, located preachers, and musical instruments were not the cause. These were only the symptoms of the underlying mindset as to how to interpret the New Testament—the constitution of the churches.

*It was this mindset of strict versus loose construction that led to the division between the Christian Church/Churches of Christ and the Churches of Christ fellowships.*

---

Neither was geography a cause in the ultimate division. It is true that prior to World War II (with its changing migration patterns—many Southerners went North or West to work in the factories producing airplanes, tanks, and other military equipment), most of the Churches of Christ were located in the former states of the Confederacy. But again, we should not confuse cause and effect. Churches of Christ were in the South because that was where strict constructionism reigned in strength.

An interesting illustration of this is demonstrated in Edwin Scott Gaustad's book *Historical Atlas of Religion in America*.<sup>7</sup> Located in a folder at the back of the book is a map based on the census returns of 1950. The religious preference of each county in the United States is color-coded. The Baptist churches represent a strong band across the South. Methodist churches, while having strong pockets in the South, also represent a wide band from Delaware to Kansas. Baptist churches are committed to local church autonomy; it should be no surprise that they are strongly represented in those states that seceded from the Union to fight for states' rights. Methodist churches are governed by episcopacy; it

should be no surprise that they are strong in those states that fought to preserve the Union. Again, what this represents is a strong congruence between political ideology and church governance. The mindset that polarized between congregationalism and episcopacy also polarized between those fighting for secession and those fighting for union.

The thrust of this article has been to suggest that the mindset of strict and loose constructionism can help us to understand many of the controversies that occurred in the history of the Restoration movement—certainly, the major controversies that resulted in the separation between the Churches of Christ and their instrumental counterparts. But this phenomenon is not limited to history and the nineteenth century. The same dynamics and application are present today.

Numerous churches today are struggling with the recent development of having Saturday night services. Some argue hotly against it, stating that it is an erosion of the biblical pattern for worship on the first day of the week. Others suggest that it is an expedient to reach members of current generations who do not operate in such paradigms. Is this simply another instance of loose/strict constructionism?

The arguments over women's role in the church can mirror the same polarity, as can the endless arguments over styles of worship. We could also mention bus ministry, radio ministry, television ministry, and church athletic teams. Perhaps these issues are not as hot today as they were some years ago, but they fit the same pattern. The arguments over loose and strict constructionism are not ended; they simply go from one new application to another. An understanding of them may give us a fuller appreciation of the struggles in previous generations as well as the patience to weather similar struggles in our own day. Whether we accept the authority of our constitution is not the question; it is a matter of knowing which interpretation to use in applying that authority.

**JAMES B. NORTH** has served as Professor of Church History at San Jose Christian College and Academic Vice President of Cincinnati Christian Bible College & Seminary.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* (Cincinnati: Standard, n.d.), 1:236.

<sup>2</sup> See W. E. Garrison and A. T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ: A History*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Bethany, 1958), 176, which borrows from Errett Gates, *The Early History of Relation and Separation of Baptists and Disciples* (Chicago: Christian Century, 1904), 43–46.

<sup>3</sup> *Christian Baptist* 1 (August 1823; reprint, Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1955): 14.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger* (1831): 237.

<sup>5</sup> Lester McAllister and William E. Tucker, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1975), 243.

<sup>6</sup> Over the process of several years of teaching the history of the Restoration movement, I came to my understanding of the applicability of strict and loose construction. When I presented this to the second Restoration Forum at Tulsa in 1985, I was surprised when a Church of Christ brother came up afterwards and mentioned that a similar analysis had been presented by the celebrated N. B. Hardeman in his published *Tabernacle Sermons*. In volume 1 of this set I discovered his presentation entitled “Federalists and Antifederalists” (*Hardeman's Tabernacle Sermons*, 2d ed. [Nashville: McQuiddy, 1924], 1:76–87). Indeed, Hardeman develops the same ideology that I have developed here. I can only appeal, however, that I came to my understanding independent of Hardeman. In addition, Hardeman, as might be expected, comes out in favor of a strict construction, while I would be more inclined (within certain limitations) to a more loose construction. All of this simply demonstrates what a wise man recorded years ago: “There is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9).

<sup>7</sup> Edwin Scott Gaustad, *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).