

The Plea of History and the History of the Plea *Roger R. Chambers*

This article was originally published in the Restoration Herald, February 1984.

A lethal combination: The weak idea propped up by the strong book — the well-written one, that is. I'm thinking of one such idea — that we ought to be more interdenominational, and a book—Leroy Garrett's *The Stone-Campbell Movement*. I critique the book; if it cannot hold its own, the idea must be left for dead, the book being the mightier of the two. And you will see that you can follow the discussion even though you probably have not read *The Stone-Campbell Movement*. Which, in turn, forces me to remember that most of you know little or nothing of the 19th century Restoration Movement. Our pulpits and classrooms are shamefully ignorant of our history, and our generation of the church is paying a high price for this singular omission.

First, the idea: A spirit of theological congeniality is settling upon our churches. The mind of John Calvin, as a matter of fact, outvotes the mind of Stone, Campbell, Scott and Co., in hundreds of our assemblies. (Let me pause and respond to the pious remonstrance that all human voices should be silent and only Jesus heard. That would be nice. If you want to try it, find a cell in a monastery and lock yourself in with your Bible. But then you will discover that in the act of thinking and interpreting, the voice of Jesus is heard only through *your own* mind.) Back to business: Some among us are convinced that we should join hands with our religious neighbors, and they are saying so at every opportunity. They nudge us toward associations with the Calvinists, the Charismatics, and, through the latter, the Catholics. More than few devotees of transdenominational good-fellowhood want us to embrace any liberal aggregation that might be in the mood to be embraced.

Some think of all this as a weak-minded affability that leads nowhere; others consider ecclesiastic friendliness to be the only reasonable expression of love, liberality, and theological self-confidence.

Again, some have decided that Calvin was right about such things as conversion and the Holy Spirit after all, so they have no real objections to belief-only Protestantism; others strongly resist Reformed theology, but insist, on other grounds, that we should join the interdenominational league.

An argument that *all* anti-isolationists use is the one from history. It goes like this: Thomas Campbell wrote *The Declaration and Address* (1809) as the charter of a reform. His Christian Association was to be just that, an association *within* existing churches. The goal: unity. The last thing they wanted was to start another church. Later restorationists quit that dream when they imbibed the very sectarianism they were supposed to eradicate. So, let's all get back to the *real* principle of our heritage: unity from within (vs. restoration from without). Our history dictates infiltration, not separation.

Enter Dr. Garrett's book to pin the badge of historicity on the whole thing. He wrote *The Stone-Campbell Movement* so he could say that the Campbells and Stone would have nothing to do with the idea of restoration, if you mean by it that the apostolic church was lost in the intervening centuries and needs to be reestablished. Garrett insists that when the word *restoration* appears in the early literature of the Movement, it always means *reformation*—in the tradition of Luther and Calvin, not the Anabaptists. The essence of the Campbell-Stone program was unity from within; restorationism was the enemy that sneaked in the back door and vandalized everything. We must, therefore, admit that we are no more the New Testament Church than anyone else (we just happen to be a bit more reformed); then we go looking for interchurch affiliations through which we can spread our reformation—from within.

There it is: *True* restorationism is the willingness to fraternize across denominational lines. The idea is becoming as common as toothpaste, and it was around long before Garrett sat down to write. But *The Stone-Campbell Movement* will give it weight and momentum, which is why I sit down to write.

The *history-tells-us* argument (for anything) has an overpowering effect on the popular mind. It has an academic feel to it; it seems to prove things by calling up absolute truth from the unchangeable past. I don't like Dr. Garrett's book because it is so good; by that I mean it is winsomely written. It is an anecdotal history, which makes it even more readable. Make no mistake, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*

is not thin on scholarship and substance; lots of good stuff in it. It is a good book, but it is not good history.

I have five things to say about *The Stone-Campbell Movement* as a *history-tells-us* argument for interdenominationalism and ecumenicity. First, history is subjective, and doing history is tricky business. What happened, happened—objectively. But the record of what happened is collected, edited, evaluated, summarized, and interpreted by a person. The dictum among professional historians is, "Before you study the history, study the historian." Restoration history is tough, for the simple reason that the historian has so much material to work through. The Reformers were, of course, a part of their age; this means they were fully persuaded that the printing press was invented for the sole purpose of promoting their cause. Everyone went into print, whether or not they had anything to say. Nineteenth-century America was a world of reformations and ideas and crusades, and they all appear in book form—exhaustively—*ad nauseam*. In 1829 one hardy author introduced his own book with these verses:

If a new thought but shakes its ear
Or wags its tail, tho' starved it look.
The world the precious news must hear
The presses groan, and lo! a book.¹

Hundreds of men connected with the Movement published on every conceivable topic over several decades. It's a genuine embarrassment of riches. All this puts a heavy burden on the historian. Because those who wrote were (like us) inconsistent, indecisive, incendiary, in transition, and often incoherent, they can be quoted to prove almost anything. And so I remind you that *any* history, profuse in documentation though it be, is the product of a process of selection. Even the most careful historian can, unconsciously perhaps, massage the data with his philosophical inclinations and give his writing a *tone*, an oh-so-subtle shading of the story.

Which brings me to the second thing I want to say about *The Stone-Campbell Movement*: The book has a tone. It's an *eirenicon*, something written to make peace between adversaries. Dr. Garrett wants an armistice between the three major divisions of the Movement, and another between the Movement and the more respectable Protestant Churches. The book has a lot of sweetness and light.

But the tone . . . Funny thing about this: As in any such book, the tone is violins-at-sunset in the ears of the reader whose attitude toward the subject is in tune with the author; it is a cat-on-the-back-fence-at-midnight to the reader who disagrees. In one of the Introductions to *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, Fred P. Thompson, Jr. promises, "There is no denunciation in it."² This gets my nomination for the knee-slapper of the year. The reader, in fact, is forced to wade a sea of denunciation: "sectarian," "party spirit," "exclusivist," "dogmatist," "schismatic," "opinionated," "factious," "intolerant," "Editor Bishop," "doctrinaire," "fundamentalist." You get the idea. Of course, the fortunate whose ideas are in line with the author's appear on the printed page as "noble"; they are "prophets." Good men are vilified in this book. Liberals, on the other hand, enjoy a kind of diplomatic immunity. They are often protected by quotation marks, i.e., liberals are really only "liberals."

So much for tone. What of the fundamental argument in the book? My third concern: *Does*, in truth, our own history rebuke us, line us up, and march us toward interchurch alliances? No.

The original genius of the Stone-Campbell reformation was unity; it was to be achieved by the Christian Association working within existing churches. We didn't need another history of the Movement to tell us that. Does this mean we are to repent of most of what went on between 1809 and 1983, post *The Declaration and Address* on the church door and go looking for denominations that will let us in bed with them? It's not that simple.

When Thomas Campbell wrote that remarkable document, he assumed that the major Protestant sects, especially those in the Reformed tradition, were *already* united on essentials (that which touches salvation). The Restoration of the Ancient Order was to be a process by which the trappings of man-originated religiosity were to be cut away, leaving the Church of Christ, which was "constitutionally one" beneath the accretions of the centuries. He said:

It is, to us, a pleasing consideration that all the Churches of Christ which naturally acknowledge each other as such, are not only agreed in the great doctrines of faith and holiness, but are also materially agreed as to the positive ordinances of the Gospel institution: so that our differences, at most, are about the things in which the kingdom of God does not consist, that is, about matters of private opinion or human invention.³

Permit me to call this the *Grand Illusion*.

The Campbells, as with all reformers, started out by knowing what they were *against* — transplanted European sectarianism; they were not in a position to know what they would have to end up being *for*. Gradually and painfully they were disabused of the Grand Illusion. It happened as they began to pursue another *Declaration and Address* principle: The Bible as the only rule of faith and practice. The early Reformers moved toward uncharted theological territory. As they set foot in that better country, they began to see that, much to their hurt and confusion, they were cutting themselves off from the Calvinism of the Protestant churches. They reluctantly, progressively, and unevenly admitted that they could no longer affirm that a unity in essentials was already in place. The Reformation, they found, would have to include the restoration of obedience to the New Testament regarding matters of faith and salvation. Their Reformation was to be, in short, an immensely more *radical* thing than they had originally envisioned. (This paragraph is important; read it again.)

At this crucial point *The Stone-Campbell Movement* commits historical malpractice. Dr. Garrett, it seems to me, still believes in the Grand Illusion. At any rate, he makes history walk on all fours to have the Campbells, *et al* continue in it. The author is determined that everyone understand that it is blasphemy against the spirit of the Campbell-Stone movement to see it as anything but a gentle, nonradical program. He uses his history to show us that there never has been a *fundamental* separation between the denominations, or between them and our outfit. The Church never needed to be restored, only reformed.

In his zeal to let history inform us of our grievous error, Dr. Garrett starts early and stays at it. Thomas Campbell was convinced, at the beginning, that the process of reformation would excavate the original pattern of the primitive Church, and this design would become the standard for the modern Church. He wrote in the *Declaration and Address*:

And we humbly think that a uniform agreement in that for the preservation of charity would be infinitely preferable to our contentions and divisions; nay, that such a uniformity is the very thing that the Lord requires if the New Testament be a perfect model, a sufficient formula for the worship, discipline, and government of the Christian Church. Let us *do* as we are there expressly told *they* did, say as *they* said; that is, profess and practice as therein expressly enjoined by precept and precedent, in every possible instance, after *their* approved example; and in so doing we shall realize and exhibit all that unity and uniformity that the primitive Church possessed, or that the law of Christ requires.⁴

Although Campbell couldn't see it yet, this principle was going to create a more radical reformation than he had in mind at the time. It also speaks of the kind of reformation that Garrett doesn't seem to believe in, so he, in effect, edits it out of the *Declaration and Address*. He cites the statement, then steps in to assure the reader that "Campbell is here overstating his case in his appeal to primitive Christianity."⁵ The author does this kind of thing more than once. Not only is it bad history to forbid a man to speak for himself, it is downright discourteous.

Throughout the book Dr. Garrett makes his ecumenical interpretation of the *Declaration and Address* the touchstone; he selects against materials that describe the radical character of the movement as it took shape. I am struck by the surpassingly strange way he interprets the break between the Reformers and the Baptists. After 1825 it became clear to the Baptist associations that the Reformers were getting too far from the kingdom. They expelled the heretical "Campbellites" and anathematized them for good measure. The issues? The source and character of faith, the purpose and necessity of baptism, the agency of conversion, regeneration, the will of man, the character of Scripture, the authority of the New Covenant.

The Baptists considered these matters essential to their religion. When all this was going on, Alexander Campbell wrote in the first editorial in his new periodical *The Millennial Harbinger*:

But the mighty agent, or rather the successful means, of this most desirable revolution, will be the *ancient gospel*. There are many gospels now preached. The gospels of every sect are something different from each other, and something different from the apostolic. There can be, in truth, but *one* gospel: but there may be many new-modified and perverted gospels.⁶

Did you hear that? Mr. Campbell used the word *revolution*; he said there is only *one* gospel, and the sects aren't preaching it. It's enough to give an interdenominationalist the vapors. Dr. Garrett writes about the break with the Baptists. He discovers (from somewhere) that while the anathemas "listed the Baptist grievances against the Reformers, these do not likely represent the real cause." He decides that "The real culprit in the separation was the sectarian spirit, perhaps from one side as much as the other."⁷ In other words, the separation was really caused by the party spirit, not because there was anything essential to divide over. That kind of hip-pocket historiography will promote ecumenicity, but it doesn't help us understand what went on in 1830.

Furthermore, the author glosses over the clear statements of the Reformers who, from the beginning, intended that unity be constructed on the authority of the Word. Hear Alexander Campbell:

If the Christians in all sects could be drawn together, then would the only real, desirable, and permanent union, of Christians be achieved. How to effect this has long been a question with us and many others. To us, it appears, the only practicable way to accomplish this desirable object, is to propound the ancient gospel and the ancient order of things in the words and sentences found in the apostolic writings — to abandon all traditions and usages not found in the Record, and to make no human terms of communion.⁸

Dr. Garrett says that unity was to be upon those essentials of the faith that all parties can agree to, a unity based on the Gospel rather than the Bible, on Christ rather than the Word or doctrine.⁹ The author has a perfect right to seek unity on something other than obedience to the apostolic Word, but it is absurd for him to claim Campbell as a like-minded colleague.

Point four: *The Stone-Campbell Movement* has it that unity-from-within worked once, the suggestion being that it could work again. Well, *it did work*—among the Baptists for 17 years. But it was a weak marriage, and the divorce came, as I have said, when the Reformers went where the Bible took them and the Baptists refused to go along.

But a good history would give us the bigger picture. The early 19th century in America was a time of exuberant optimism, and the Reformers were not insulated from their age. Students of American intellectual history know that the young American republic declared its faith in man and in the perfectibility of his institutions, including the church. It was a time when every grand ideal would take hold, when honest men would be quick to see wisdom and truth when they met them and would join every worthy crusade. The restoration fathers genuinely expected that sincere believers in the Christ would throw away their tired old sectarian theologies and embrace the Ancient Order. It was a time for believing such things. Well, it didn't happen quite that way. The reformation from within was forced to become the restoration from the outside.

Our age has gone too far the other way; we are overly pessimistic. Even so, it is a bad history that ignores the enculturated optimism underlying the *Declaration and Address* and glibly invokes it as a working document for today. Moreover, the *Declaration and Address* presupposes that people in the churches have both the ability and will to operate with enough sustained rationality to think the issues through and make good decisions. If it didn't work as expected in the 19th century (when people were glad to talk about theology), it won't work now. The churches today, for the most part, are riding the culture-swing to subjectivism and sentimentality. Few care enough about sound teaching to work up a "tut-tut" about the Ancient Order of Things. We think if we can shout the name of Jesus loud enough, nothing else matters. Doctrine is a bad word; reason is misidentified as the enemy of true spirituality. As long as we

feel close to the Lord, that's enough truth to do us, thank you. We aren't going to do very much toward a unity based on the authority of the Word until we restore *among ourselves* a respect for the authority of the Word. I'm saying this: Our culture has made us less intellectually prepared for unity-from-within than were believers in the 19th century. Because he does his history *in vacuo*, Dr. Garrett's book takes on the character of a tract.

Last, what divided the movement? According to the book, it was restorationism that split us the first time. Not so. The movement was fractured by bad hermeneutics. Our brethren who make the musical instrument a test of fellowship use the Bible as the Handbook for the life and worship of the Church that leaves no gaps; the Book that prescribes in such a way that its silence proscribes. This is, of course, a leftover from Calvinism.

According to Dr. Garrett, the Disciple-Independent split came primarily because of the unwillingness of many to follow the true principle of the Reformation and enter into interdenominational alliances. Not so. The issue with the Disciples was not whether one ought to hug the denominations, it was over whether one ought to believe and obey the Bible. We get this from the author:

While the issues, whether federation (interdenominational connections), open membership, or liberalism, may have been the *formal* causes . . . it was lack of brotherly love on the part of the leadership of both sides that was the *final* cause.¹⁰

I wish I knew what he is saying here. I think he means that if we had really loved one another, we and the Disciples would still be in the same family. Nonsense.

We have a mandate from God to love denominationalists; we do not have a mandate from history to link ecclesiastic arms with the denominations. Restorationism is neither a doctrine nor a denomination; it is a direction. And the restoration fathers pointed the way — from Calvinism and sectarianism, toward truth and freedom. We are in the mainstream of the Campbell-Stone movement if we follow their principles; we are not called upon to accept their conclusions. It is the worst kind of Campbellism to plant a flag on the *Declaration and Address* and defend it from the history that followed. This, I believe, Dr. Garrett has tried to do.

A Final word: This essay has a tone of its own, as you have noticed. It sounds very much as if it were written by someone who is convinced that we are separated from belief-only Protestantism, the neo-charismatics, and Roman Catholicism by matters that touch salvation.

Footnotes

¹ Henry Brown. Narrative of Anti-Masonick Excitement (1892). preface.

² Leroy Garrett. *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (Joplin: College Press. 1981). p. vii.

³ *Declaration and Address* (1809), p. 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁵ Garrett. *SCM*, p. 157.

⁶ MH I, No. 1.5.6.

⁷ Garrett, *SCM*. pp. 227-229.

⁸ MH III, No. 5, 195.

⁹ Garrett. *SCM*, pp. 363, 364.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 649, 650.