

TWO HUNDRED YEARS

and Counting

BY LYNN ANDERSON

Two hundred years ago, Barton W. Stone and colleagues signed the Springfield Presbytery out of existence and “dissolved into the body of Christ at large.” This last will is a DNA document of the Restoration Movement.

Not long after it was signed, Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell shook hands to unite their two Christian freedom-and-unity movements into one. In its early decades, that movement, the Stone-Campbell Movement, flourished in a most remarkable way. In the words of Stone, the movement swept across the nation “like fire in dry stubble.”

A GRAND DREAM

The first 100 years were glorious. But during the next 100 years the “glory has departed,” and we have divided—and in some streams subdivided into fragments. The fire has died down, and the movement is not making anywhere near the global impact it seemed at first to promise. When we count noses, all three streams of the movement don’t add up to much more than 3 million, in a world approximating 7 billion.

Will that which began with a bang, end with only a whimper? Was the grand



dream of Christian liberty and unity a flawed dream, a failed experiment?

Some may think so. But I am decidedly not one of that number. On the contrary, I believe the hopes of those who signed the “Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery” are still valid and current.

WHERE DID WE LOSE OUR WAY?

But somewhere across the years, we lost our way for awhile. What happened? I do not profess to be a historian, but I believe at least part of what happened looked something like this:

Enlightenment thinking—The movement was born in a time of optimistic humanism spilling out of the enlightenment. This nation itself was shaped in the confidence that “we can get a

country right” this time. We had a right Constitution, right laws, and right governance. This spirit of early America was also the spirit of the foundations of the Restoration Movement. “Let’s get church right this time.”

But this lofty view of human reason has long since proven to be both exaggerated and naïve.

View of Scripture—In such an environment, some appeared to view the Bible as a sort of constitution—in fact that very language was actually used on occasion—and as a book of case law framing the right doctrine. Many saw Scripture as an ecclesiastical blueprint mapping our polity and practice.

Regionalism—The residual traumatic impact of the Civil War was and still is a huge shaping force on the American psyche. This profoundly impacted the Stone-Campbell Movement. True, the movement appeared to survive the Civil War itself intact. But our solidarity began to crumble in the aftermath of Reconstruction, when resentment festered among starving brothers in the South toward brothers in the North over what southern Christians perceived

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to be the indifference to their poverty and misery.

In addition, educational levels in the North began to surpass those in the devastated South. Mixed with Reconstruction resentment this produced a streak of anti-intellectualism among some leaders in the South, possibly compounded by attitudes of intellectual superiority among some in the North.

These factors combined with geographic distance to create social separation, even isolation from each other. In such a climate, misinformation flourished and suspicion increased, some of which doggedly persists till our times.

LIGHT ON THE HORIZON

However, for the most part, we do not live there any longer. Today we are opening authentic communication with each other—not debate, but sincere dialogue. We are getting to know one another and genuinely listening to one another. In the process, old stereotypes are fading. We are discovering that there are not as many differences among us as we were led to believe. And it is becoming more and more obvious that we have been separated far too long over far too little.

We are coming now upon hopeful times. Several rays of hope stream over a new horizon:

A new era—We now live in a post-Enlightenment period, where most of the folks who hunger for God have discovered he transcends our categories; he is too awesome for us to explain and capture in our little minds, let alone confine to our diminutive camps. In addition we see that the human situation is far too complex for any movement to actually “Get it right, once and for all.” I like the way the elders of one large congregation put it, “We love the truth of God, and pursue it heart and mind. But at the end

of the day, we would rather be righteous than right.”

A new view of the Bible—We have come to see the Bible very differently from the way it was viewed in the hey-

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day of the Enlightenment. While we still view Scripture as the inspired Word of God, we see that God gave us the Bible not as constitution, with case law and blueprints, but as the way to know his heart and his will. We are growing more humble before the compelling and magnificent story of God’s long and loving interaction with the human race. The supreme highlight of the whole dramatic plot is the story of the cross that draws us unto him.



This helps us read all of Scripture with a new perspective. For example, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. . . . Love your neighbor as yourself.” We see love, not doctrine, as the foundation of unity. While doctrine is important, total agreement will not unify us if we do not love each other. And if we genuinely love each other, we can be one despite doctrinal differences.

As for me and my house, “We will not make a test of fellowship that which God has not made a condition of salvation.”

Humility—We sense that even our best understandings are limited—and that each of us keeps growing in his or her understanding by listening thoughtfully to the understanding of others. We need not abandon cherished convictions to count each other as brothers. In fact, we are discovering that we can value strong conviction, but at the same time stay open to new light. More and more, devoted followers of Jesus and serious students of the Bible are recovering the grace to live out the sentiments of J.W. McGarvey, when he said, “I would never presume to limit the grace of God to my understanding of the Scriptures.”

A COMMON CAUSE

Another bright spot is our passion for a common mission. Our common mission is not unity. Unity is a work of the spirit. But unity is also a by-product of pursuing a common mission. What then is our common mission? The Great Commission! Bringing people who are alienated from God into authentic relationship with him, and growing them into authentic disciples. It is precisely here that I see hope for the future of the movement.

First, passion for the com-

mon mission is bringing many Disciples, churches of Christ, and independent Christian churches back into respectful dialogue, even cooperative efforts in some quarters. This respectful dialogue and cooperation has been growing quietly for more than 40 years. Now it is emerging in more visible and mainstream forums. A groundswell of trust and respect and understanding is rising.

A refreshing open-mindedness is growing too, all around. Things that were issues of dogma a decade ago are becoming merely matters of preference or opinion now. And for many leaders, even some matters of strong conviction are no longer tests of fellowship.

AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS RETURNED

Most wonderful of all, we are discovering that the Restoration ideal is not

only still valid but the hottest brand going: “In matters of faith unity, in matters of opinion liberty, and in all things charity.” This idea is gaining appeal outside our Stone-Campbell circles and is breaking free from negative perceptions. Years ago most of us gave up on the hope that we would come to unity by resolving our differences over instrumental music. Indeed organic union may not happen. It may not even be important. But there is great hope that we can come together in a common mission. In fact this is already happening. For example, already several a cappella churches of Christ and independent Christian churches are partnering together to plant new churches

In the face of a world that has desperately, hopelessly lost its way, these are not times to give up on the dream.

Nor have we the right to abandon the mission. The Great Commission is still as great as ever. And in the face of this overwhelming challenge, we can no longer afford the luxury of division.

Let us be done with hostility. It is high time for each of us to leave behind our self-perceptions of superiority and whatever deep wounds we may have received in the past. Let us stand together eagerly at the place of level ground—at the foot of the cross.

Lynn Anderson is founder of Hope Network Ministries, San Antonio, Texas. This essay is adapted from the message he brought at the closing convocation of the Cane Ridge Reunion at Central Christian Church, Lexington, Kentucky, June 28, 2004. The meeting was a part of the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the signing of “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery.” Read the entire text of this address at www.lynnanderson.org.