

LESSON ELEVEN: COOPERATION AND DIVISION

A. INTER-CONGREGATIONAL COOPERATION WITHIN THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT

1. The situation up to about 1840

- a. From its inception, the movement had been strongly congregational.
- b. “Officers” had no responsibility and little influence outside the congregations of which they were members.
- c. Existing multi-congregational organizations were usually dissolved for “lack of scriptural authority.”
- d. But Alexander Campbell had opposed dissolution of the Mahoning Association.
- e. At his suggestion, members of the congregations which had comprised the Association agreed to meet annually.
- f. “Cooperation meetings” became commonly practiced even as they became more and more controversial.
- g. The followers of Stone, who had always based their doctrine more on individual life than church organization, were distrustful of the cooperation meetings from the beginning.

2. Developments in the decade of the 1840s

- a. The *Millennial Harbinger* carried a series of articles by Campbell arguing for multi-congregational associations.
- b. Opposition to cooperatives was sporadic until Tolbert Fanning founded the *Gospel Advocate* in 1855.
- c. The first formal organization was the American Christian Bible Society, founded in 1845 and dissolved, after much dissention and opposition, in 1856.
- d. In 1849, Campbell, writing in the *Harbinger*, issued a call for a “general convention.”
- e. The resulting convention, held in Cincinnati in October, resulted in establishment of the American Christian Missionary Society.
- f. Campbell’s goal was inter-congregational cooperation in all “church work,” not just evangelism.

B. BEHIND THE SCENES, AND BELOW THE SURFACE

1. Factors in the distrust of associations

- a. Many of the preachers had been ousted from denominational fellowships because they refused to accept the institutional creeds as authoritative.
- b. They could not find in the scriptures any plan for the organization of multiple congregations.
- c. Besides, the movement was and always had been *congregational*, by heritage and by instinct.

2. The issue of scriptural silence

- a. Thomas Campbell had said, “Speak where the Bible speaks; be silent where the Bible is silent.”
- b. But what had he meant by the latter phrase?
- c. Campbell’s core purpose was unity based on a minimalist approach to the “science” of scriptural interpretation.
- d. Therefore, what he was primarily trying to convey was, “No test may be used to exclude someone from Christian fellowship which is not explicitly set forth in scripture.”
- e. Campbell’s principle was based on the Greek-Thomist-Humanist-Enlightenment notion that “to know what is best is to do what is best.”
- f. It was *axiomatic* that a reasonable appeal to unity based on doing just what the Bible said, and excluding others only where there was explicit scriptural authority for exclusion, would succeed in settling working differences.

3. Problems

- a. If either depravity or Satanic influence is (partly or fully) true, people will not confine their practices to what is prescribed in scripture.
- b. If people refuse to practice only what the Bible says, why should others receive them as Christians?
- c. How can a congregation deal with one or two members who sincerely hold what the rest consider to be an unreasonably restrictive view of what the scriptures permit (*e.g.*, Zwingli’s view of singing)?
- d. If we try to include everybody in a fellowship that it is possible to include, what collective work will that fellowship be able to agree to undertake?
- e. Having fundamentally different emphases, the Campbell followers and the Stone followers were never quite agreed on the basis for accepting others as Christians, and for cooperating with other congregations.

C. THE ARGUMENTS

1. In favor of societies

- a. "The scriptures give no plan for the organization of multiple congregations.
- b. "Nor do the scriptures, explicitly or in principle, prohibit multiple-congregation cooperative organizations.
- c. "Yet there is work ('kingdom work') which is clearly beyond the means of a single congregation.
- d. "Therefore, any organization which accomplishes such work without violating a command or principle governing individual or collective activities is allowed.
- e. "Furthermore, without such organizations 'the demands of current society' could not be met."

2. Against societies

- a. "A society is a human organization, unauthorized and unscriptural, doing the work God gave the local congregation.
- b. "Furthermore, the society is an infringement on the autonomy of the local congregation.
- c. "Besides which, if such societies are necessary for doing some work which God expects the church to do, where are the conditions of membership in such societies set forth in the scriptures?"
- d. "Finally, the society does violate the scriptural principle of *restricted authority*."

3. A non-dispassionate analysis

- a. The Campbell view of societies departed from the views of the Disciples and even the Baptists.
- b. There is no evidence from scripture that the church has any identity apart from its members or any work which is not the responsibility of some individual member.
- c. An "institutional" church is a church which is given such an identity and such a work.
- d. But the opposition was ineffective because they, too, had embraced an institutional view of the church.

D. REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM

1. The position and its weakness

- a. Proponents of the ACMS never conceded that the society was an "outside" agency doing the church's work; to them, it was simply an efficient means for the church to do the work that God had given it.
- b. How, then, would the proponents of the societies explain the developments which ensued in the mid-1800s?

2. Discussions and decisions involved in formulating the ACMS charter

- a. What should the name be?
- b. How should the ACMS be organized? (They settled on appointment of a president, 20 vice-presidents, two secretaries and an executive board of 25 "managers.")
- c. A recommendation was made, and accepted, that churches not accept as a missionary preacher any man not approved by at least two participating congregations.
- d. A recommendation was made, and approved, that for a man to be recognized as an evangelist by the ACMS that man had to be "ordained" by another evangelist already approved by the ACMS.
- e. Was an evangelist to be considered the "officer" of a single congregation or of multiple congregations?
- f. A "constitution" of 13 articles was adopted.
- g. What kind of membership should the ACMS have? It was decided that the society should have three types of memberships: \$10 for an Annual Delegate; \$20 for a Life Member; \$100 for a Life Director.
- h. Article Seven allowed the "executive board" to "establish such agencies as the society may require ..."

E. TAKING STOCK

1. What aspects of the Campbell-Stone restoration made this division possible and/or inevitable?
2. Which of these characteristics continues to be a factor today?
3. With what result?