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## An Analysis of the Repudiation of Restoration

*The Renewal of Church, The Panel of Scholars Reports*, W. B. Blakemore, Editor, St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1963. Volume I, *The Reformation of Tradition*, ed. Ronald E. Osborn, 356 pp. Volume II, *The Reconstruction of Theology*, ed. Ralph G. Wilburn, 347 pp. Volume III, *The Revival of the Churches*, ed. William Barnett Blakemore, 368 pp. \$6.00 per volume.

In 1956 the United Christian Missionary Society and the Board of Higher Education of Disciples of Christ created a Panel of Scholars whose duty it was to re-examine the beliefs and doctrines of the Disciples of Christ in a scholarly way. It was agreed that the Panel should have freedom to decide areas of study and approaches, but it was hoped that the scholars would consider theologically some of the more practical issues and problems confronting Disciples of Christ. The Panel met for the first time in January 1957 under the chairmanship of Howard E. Short, now editor of *The Christian*. In 1958 the chairmanship passed to W. B. Blakemore, Dean of Disciples Divinity House, University of Chicago. By this time the Panel had a total of seventeen members. The Panel completed its work in March 1962, and these three volumes are the printed results. The volumes consist of papers by individual authors, but each paper was read before the Panel and the article in print incorporates whatever revision the author wished to make as the result of the criticism and suggestions of his colleagues. In spite of a considerable amount of unanimity among those on the Panel, the results are not official Disciples theology. Blakemore writes, "The Panel was never commissioned to write a new theology for our churches. What it did contract to do was to search out and clarify the theological, biblical, sociological, and historical issues involved in our practical life."

Because of the amount of material contained in these three volumes, the critical task is difficult. I have decided that what might be the most helpful is an examination of the underlying presuppositions which serve to inform the conclusions which are drawn throughout the three volumes. In this manner primary attention can be focused on what is basic to contemporary Disciple thinking, while at the same time noticing some of the particular conclusions as they relate to these major themes. The particular themes I have selected are (1) theological methodology, (2) the role of the scriptures, (3) the progress of theology, and (4) the unity of Christendom. Finally, I should like to comment on the scholarship in the volumes and suggest what relevance the volumes might have for a reader from the church of Christ.

In an essay in Volume I titled "Reasonable, Empirical, Pragmatic," W. B. Blakemore claims, "The thesis of this paper is that for the main stream of Disciple thinkers—conservative, middle-of-the-road, and liberal alike—there has never been any question regarding the sole validity of a reasonable and empirical approach to all the questions of religion." Blakemore is correct in seeing such methodology as underlying the thinking of the fathers of the restoration and no doubt also in seeing it as the methodology of the liberal disciples trained at the University of Chicago. But Blakemore and the other Disciples writing in these volumes are not as helpful as they might be in that they fail to point out the manner in which their empiricism differs from that of the fathers.

The empiricism of the Campbell variety is to be identified with the sensation which impinges on man from the outside. But the empiricism of contemporary Disciples is more indebted to Henry N. Wieman, Professor of Theology, emeritus, of the University of Chicago. In the empiricism of Wieman the concern is at least as much with inner human experience as with sensation from the exterior. (see his *Methods of Private Religious Living*, 1929) Blakemore seems to ignore this additional dimension, but it becomes obvious in his articles on worship. Ralph G. Wilburn reiterates the importance of experience: "The truth of the gospel is truth known and tested in actual experience of reality." (Vol. II, p. 314) He contends that it is empiricism which has saved Disciple theology, but he also fails to point out the manner in which the empiricism he proposes differs from that of the fathers. "The emphasis on an experience-centered grasp of Christ has finally saved the Disciple communion, as a whole, from the erroneous view in which one regards something historically objective (in this instance the biblical writings) as the actual *object* of faith." (*Ibid.*) It is further obvious from Wilburn's writing that his empiricism owes a great deal to the nineteenth century German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, about whom he wrote his doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago. Schleiermacher, however, limited religious experience to the inner man, or feeling, and this Wilburn does not wish to do.

In a second manner, and one even more crucial, the empiricism of the fathers differs from that of the Panel of Scholars. The fathers, as Wilburn obliquely observes, considered the scriptures to be the primary data of religious empiricism. That this is the case can be discovered in the writings of Campbell, Milligan (who is singled out by Blakemore), and J. S. Lamar in his *Organon of Scripture*, whom Blakemore does not mention. For the Panel of Scholars, in contrast, the data for the empiricism and pragmatism is to be supplied not only from the scriptures, but, as Blakemore points out in his introduction, from the theology of the church, culture, history, and practical affairs.

One of the criticisms I have of the articles in these volumes is that, while the authors point out some of the respects in which their views are the same as the fathers, in others they confuse the issue by using the same catch phrase as the father but to mean something different. This should serve notice that, in spite of popular opinion, it is not so much the words used that makes the difference between conservatives and liberals but what is meant by the words. Words can have exact meanings if each person who uses them means the same thing, but ultimately how one uses words is more crucial than the words themselves.

It is not clear, however, that contemporary Disciples coming out of Yale, who are possibly as numerous as those from Chicago, are as empirical and pragmatic as Blakemore might hope. The most obvious case in these volumes is the essay by Yale Ph.D. William G. West. In an article titled "Toward a Theology of Preaching," West clearly constructs his theology from a neo-orthodox or more precisely an existentialist vantage point. Both the ideas he presents and his bibliography make this clear. Blakemore may be correct that "Disciples, though, did not fall in line with the theological revival of the late 1920's and early 1930's. Neo-orthodoxy was, for Disciples, too speculative in mood, too rationalistic in its method of rooting thought systems in confessions of a few dominant conceptions." (Volume I, p. 177) But it does appear that in spite of eschewing the church dogmatics brand of neo-orthodoxy some of the younger disciples these days are being influenced by a less-structured existentialism. Blakemore probably speaks from the vantage point of those Disciples who attended the University of Chicago. Chicago itself was not influenced by neo-orthodoxy as long as Henry Wieman prevailed. The break from empiricism at Chicago was signaled by the appointment of Markus Barth, the son of Karl Barth, to a professorship in New Testament in 1955.

It is interesting that, in spite of some break with traditional methodology in a few of the articles, no author in the volumes takes any other author to task on this or any other matter. In the essays, a point of view is often worked out by contrast with opposing views, but the opposing views are never those of other authors in the books. Because of this I have the uneasy feeling in reading the volumes that a unanimity has been forced because of a desire to present an ecumenical front. Furthermore, some of the authors imply that the views presented in the volumes are the views commonly held by contemporary Protestant theologians. Such a unanimity of views in contemporary theology is a fiction. To come to such a conclusion one must wink at all the theological debate both in Europe and America of the past forty years.

## II

The second major theme running throughout the book is that though the Bible is crucial it cannot be treated as constitutional law

in the manner of the fathers. According to Ronald E. Osborn, "Alexander Campbell habitually thought of the church in political analogies, and what more natural than that the church should require a written constitution? . . . From Thomas Campbell's Proposition IV to the most recent editorial in the *Christian Standard* it does not seem to have occurred to the adherents of this view to ask whether the New Testament is indeed a constitutional document. The assumption was postulated as axiomatic, though we must declare it false." (Volume I, p. 270) Blakemore's criticism is that Campbell was too literalistic and rationalistic in his Biblical interpretation, and therefore a new outlook on the Bible is required. "The newer understandings of biblical material enable us to escape both literalism and rationalism, and to return to the Bible with a zest and sparkle and delight as it nourishes our spirits. It is no longer the book of the law binding the spirit, but the book of grace feeding the spirit." (Volume III, p. 19) Wilburn adds two more criticisms to the manner in which the Fathers conceived the Bible. Since the fathers lived before the days of Biblical criticism, they could view the scriptures as perfect knowledge from God. But since the advent of that criticism it can no longer be looked at in that manner. Secondly, the new understanding of the historical character of human existence makes the Bible itself a historical document and hence applicable chiefly to its own setting. We therefore must not attempt a reconstruction of everything we find in the New Testament in our age, for the age in which we live is different.

From these premises the thesis runs throughout the essays though ambivalently in the case of certain authors, that theology must be reconstructed for each age. The principle "We speak where the Bible speaks" is thereby overthrown, and in its place is substituted some such principle as "We speak as the age speaks." Of course, coining this phrase is unfair, but then, inasmuch as we are never told very clearly what is to be substituted for the restoration phrase and inasmuch as the emphasis is always that a theology must be for the time, it is difficult to know how to put the current Disciples motto if not in this way. The Bible still has its place in the church, of course, but its role is ambiguous. The focus is to be on Jesus Christ, and all the panelists willingly accept the restoration slogan "No Creed but Christ." But even the Christ in Disciple theology tells us little about what Christianity is to be, for the Christ is an amorphous one, who seemingly can be painted, as artists have always painted him, according to the styles of the time in which they live. Jesus Christ thus becomes the figure who baptizes the theology of the age rather than calling it into judgment.

It is precisely at this point that the Disciples fail in the theological task. Theology always flows from critique and construction. and so the theologian must set forth the grounds from which he hopes to work at his task. If he fails to do this, theology merely is an ear-to-the-ground enterprise and is often self-contradictory. The charge

is serious, but I have looked carefully and I do not see how the Disciples can retrieve themselves in these volumes. To point to Jesus Christ is not an adequate premise if you make him out to be what you want him to be. Such an absence of beginning points would be a major defect for any of the theologians with whom the Disciples would like to associate themselves. Chiefly, of course, I would like to criticize the Disciples for their non-biblical posture. But one cannot launch a cogent attack on what they wish to substitute for the Bible without knowing with some sort of precision what it is. As an indication of what happens, how is it that Jesus Christ can be called to sit in judgment on Biblicism, literalism, and fundamentalism, but not on the denial of signs and wonders? The Biblical Christ may indeed judge the former, but he also calls to task the latter. By what principle do these disciples take Jesus seriously in one matter and not the other? Some theologians advance a principle, but not the Panel of Scholars.

The attitude of the Panel toward the scriptures has its influence on a number on matters including that of church polity. W. B. Blakemore in an essay titled "The Christian Task and the Church's Ministry" points out that the majority of Disciples' churches now have what he calls "functional officers." In churches which have elders and deacons these officers primarily serve at the Lord's table. Blakemore admits that elders and deacons could be functional leaders, but he argues that the officers found in the scriptures should by no means preclude the pragmatic needs of the times. In fact, Dwight E. Stevenson argues in an article titled "Concepts of the New Testament Church Which Contribute to Disciple Thought About the Church" that the New Testament church organization was pragmatic in form and changed during the course of New Testament history. There is some truth in Stevenson's argument, but much of it depends on the argument from silence, which at best is not as conclusive as his conclusion requires. It is interesting that the Panel takes the fathers to task for making conclusive cases when the evidence is not so strong, then draws similarly faulty conclusions themselves.

In discussing the relation of Disciple thought to contemporary theology Blakemore writes, "Only more recently, with the emergence of a biblical theology, have Disciples been able to feel at home with the current theological climate. Biblical theology once again established a basis of detailed data upon which the mind can go to work empirically." Frankly, it escapes me as to why the Disciples feel at home once again in Biblical theology if these volumes are any indication. It may well be that Blakemore and I have an altogether different understanding of what Biblical theology is all about. But I find little attempt at Biblical theology in these volumes, even from the standpoint of liberal Biblical theology. In fact, even though I disagree with Harvey Cox at a number of points and think his Biblical interpretation is sometimes mistaken, I think his book *Secular City* much more nearly qualifies as Biblical theology than do these three

volumes. At least, Cox spends a considerable amount of time looking in the Bible; and, when he does, on his own grounds, he takes it seriously. It is difficult to say as much for these authors, except when they explicitly assign themselves the task of looking at the scriptures, and, when they do, they don't always take what they find seriously.

### III

The third theme has to do with doctrinal progress. If the Disciples have an underlying presupposition other than an amorphous Christ, it is the idea of doctrinal progress. This idea is not always in such clear evidence in these volumes, but it is present. If the Bible is no longer the only grounds for constructing theology, then the substitute is a pragmatic empiricism which locates doctrinal progress. From this it would appear that the value of a doctrine ("value" because, according to Wilburn, with our enlightened historical relativism "truth" is passé) depends on its modernity. One wonders why anti-legalism is not now outmoded inasmuch as it must be at least 3000 years since its origin, if not longer. Regardless, theology must progress. In the closing essay in the theology volume titled "Disciple Thought in Protestant Perspective: an Interpretation," Wilburn writes, "The theology of Discipledom has, from the beginning, been a growing, progressive quantity. One has but to compare tendencies in present-day Disciple thought with positions held by the founding fathers to realize that the progressive spirit is part of the very lifeblood of Discipledom." (Vol. II, p. 305)

It is true that progress has been a continual theme in the history of the movement, but what Wilburn does not tell us is that the goal of the progress differs widely from epoch to epoch. Alexander Campbell looked for progress in the understanding of and obedience to the word of God or the scriptures. He believed that society would advance in this respect and, to the extent that it did, the millennium would be introduced. A different program is that offered by *Progress*, a book published by the Campbell Institute in 1917, with Herbert L. Willett, Orvis F. Jordan, and Charles M. Sharpe as editors. This volume represents the advance ideas of the liberal Disciples in the early part of the twentieth century. In this book is found much dissatisfaction with the platform of the fathers in terms of Biblical interpretation and emphases. But the general idea of progress is that Biblical criticism has permitted an even better understanding of the Bible than that of the fathers and that Disciples in the era of World War I need to progress along these lines. In addition it was felt that progress needed to be made not so much along lines of purifying doctrine, but in manner of life. Disciples should therefore be active in programs for the needy and in securing prohibition of alcoholic beverages. Wilburn, in particular, in these volumes wishes to foster still another goal of progress. He is not content merely to know the Bible better but wishes to progress beyond it to new and better theological perspectives. He makes much of historical relativism and argues that

#### IV

Interest in unity in these volumes is not as prominent as one might expect in view of the attack on the Panel report by conservatives in the Christian Churches. These volumes have been designated as groundwork for merging with other denominations by the conservatives. Only one article in the three volumes is exclusively devoted to unity, an article by Ralph Wilburn titled "The Unity We Seek." Unity comes up on occasion in other articles, but it is clear that the main intent of these essays is to formulate a perspective on what it is Disciples believe. Of course, such a statement appears necessary preparation for any discussion of unity, especially in view of the fact that no one person can speak officially for the Disciples in such discussions. Unless some unanimity exists among Disciples, they would find it exceedingly difficult to make any concrete proposals as to the manner in which it would be possible for them to unite with some other denomination.

Not much new is said on unity in these volumes from the standpoint of liberal Disciple views of the past quarter century. It is clear that the Panel wishes to scrap Alexander Campbell's program of unifying Christians in the denominations and turn to unifying denominations. It is further obvious that the basis for such unity is no longer the Bible but an amorphous Christ, who can acquire whatever shape is required by changing theological winds. It seems strange that while in Europe considerable credence is being given to the unity that results from Biblical studies the Disciples have abandoned this as a part of their program even though it is inherent in their tradition.

We should be clear, however, that these Disciples are not proposing complete abandonment of their historical stances. The proposal is that they must enter all ecumenical discussions armed with "no creed but Christ," congregational polity, and believer's baptism. But at the same time these doctrines are certainly subject to revision to make them more palatable to differing practices in other denominations. An interesting case in point is the argument which W. B. Blakemore makes concerning the view taken toward missionary and other societies as it relates to congregational autonomy. Blakemore borrows his thinking from Douglas Horton, a Congregationalist. The argument is that associations and councils should fall under the rubric of "congregation" and as such should enjoy the autonomy that is granted to the congregation. It is interesting that churches of Christ have placed brotherhood projects under the supervision of a congregation while Disciples, if they follow the proposal of Blakemore, will designate a brotherhood project by the label "congregation."

The problem with the stated Disciples outlook on unity is that no ground rules are set up which take disqualification seriously. The Disciples rightly insist upon the Biblical demand for unity. But because effort toward unity must always be a part of the life of the church, it does not therefore follow that everyone is to be accepted



as a Christian. Wilburn objects to the forced unity of Roman Catholicism, but his program seems to have the same end even though it is attained by a different route. To define Christianity so loosely so that everyone is encompassed is a means of assuring that everyone is a Christian. But is it the case that everyone is a Christian who can be included in an infinitely flexible periphery? Such a program seems ultimately headed for disaster as indeed has already happened in the case of the "death of God" theologians. It is no doubt the case that boundaries for Christianity have often been drawn to suit human prejudice rather than divine fiat. But divine boundaries there are if Christianity has any unique claims to make. If it does not, why bother? The problem with Disciples' statements on unity is that they do not address themselves seriously to the boundary beyond which unity becomes unChristian. Until they are willing to do this, the person concerned with the Biblical faith must be suspicious of what they are about. Already, of course, they have exceeded the limits of the Biblical faith, but just how far is not clear, for no boundary has been set.

## V

Much excellent scholarship emerges in these volumes though some of it is obviously better than the rest. One can learn much history of the movement from these volumes, but he must be discerning, for some of the authors do not know the history as well as they ought, and others write history with an axe to grind. Frank N. Garder, in spite of being a church historian, seems somewhat lost as he stumbles around through Disciples' history. In addition, he approaches the Disciples from motifs supplied by ancient church history which seem inadequate if one hopes to understand what the Disciples are about theologically. The work of William G. West and W. B. Blakemore seems the most sound historically, though Ralph Wilburn and Ronald Osborn have a surprising insight into the currents at work in the movement. The difficulty with the latter two is that they write Disciple history with a vengeance. I am not naive enough to think that history is ever written without bias, but on the other hand some history is obviously more biased than other history.

These volumes are in some measure to remedy the past fault of Disciples in being little concerned with theology. But in spite of an effort of some consequence, I doubt that what goes on in these volumes qualifies as serious theology, the main reason being, as I have already noted, that beginning points are not examined seriously or worked out systematically. Certain efforts at the theology of practical matters, however, are not without merit. I have in mind W. B. Blakemore's "Worship and the Lord's Supper" and Stephen J. England's "God and the Day's Work." The only writer in the volumes who approaches fundamental theology is Ralph G. Wilburn, but his theology is too hurried and leaves too many loose ends dangling to be considered theology in any scholarly sense. In the whole of the Disciple movement no scholar has yet emerged who has been ac-

claimed by those outside the movement. This is clearly the case as it has to do with theology, but interestingly enough no Disciple has as yet been acclaimed among the greats in Biblical scholarship, though a few, including J. Philip Hyatt, have received international recognition. If these volumes are any indication, it would appear that no stellar candidates can be put forward from among the present crop of scholars. Ralph Wilburn is the most likely candidate, but he often appeals to other theologians as a means of supporting his views, and therefore his own workmanship attests to his rank below the greats.

These volumes can be profitably read by every member of the churches of Christ who is concerned about the past and the prospects for the future. These volumes make painfully obvious what can happen to a group grounded in the Biblical faith when liberalizing influences commence to make inroads. What is most painful is that some of these forces can already be seen at work in the churches of Christ, and one has the eerie feeling that he is reading, not history but prophecy. One is reminded of the two sisters of Ezekiel 23, the younger of whom followed in the mistakes of the older rather than learning from them.

At the same time there is much to learn from these volumes as to the manner in which the faith of the fathers of the restoration was sometimes superficial and other times misdirected. Two excellent articles in this respect are by J. Philip Hyatt, "The Place of the Old Testament in the Christian Faith" and "The Origin and Meaning of Christian Baptism." Hyatt is perhaps the one author in the volumes who does Biblical theology, and strangely enough he seems not the old unreconstructed liberal that he is in the Jeremiah commentary in *The Interpreter's Bible*. The reading of these volumes is a program of considerable proportions in which one is torn in various directions. But the results are well worth the effort if one hopes to be conversant with the problems that now face the churches of Christ.

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