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The Stone-Campbell Millennium: A Historical Theological Perspective

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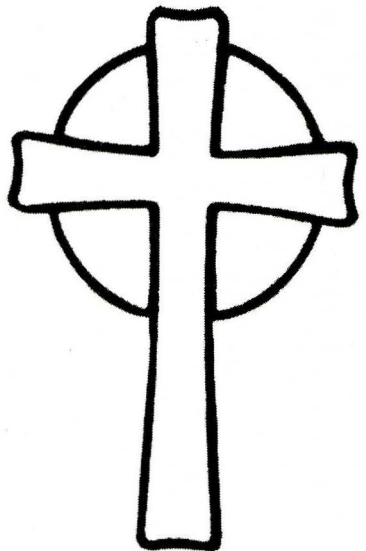
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THE STONE-CAMPBELL MILLENNIUM: A HISTORICAL THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Early in the twentieth century Churches of Christ suffered a painful division over eschatology. At the center of the division was premillennialism (or perhaps more precisely, Classical Dispensationalism). In all events, all those who believed that Jesus would return to reign on the earth for one thousand years were eventually marked as heretics and shunned by the majority of mainstream churches, and amillennialism (or, as some contemporaries prefer, realized millennialism) became the dogmatic eschatological stance of the mainstream.¹ This turn of events was incongruous with the nineteenth century's strength of unity, which existed in spite of eschatological differences. The great pioneers of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement² in the nineteenth century held passionately to a diversity of evangelical eschatological views while generally *refusing* to be dogmatic about them. Ironically, the amillennialism that has become the dominant eschatological view among Churches of Christ was not held by *any* of the early pioneers.³ Most importantly, however, they shared a common faith in and hope for the *future*: God was going to establish and rule over an earthly kingdom. He would right every wrong and create an earthly community that would be free from evil and full of joy, justice, peace, and harmony for a long period of time, if not for a literal one thousand years. These aspects of the heritage alone should underscore the relevance of the subject and justify renewed and serious reflection.

¹ I use "dogmatic" to mean the exercise of any formal or informal ecclesiastical authority that presents a doctrine or doctrines (the dogma or dogmas) to be accepted without question and that mandates separation from or excommunication of those who demur.

² Hereinafter referred to as SCM.

³ Within the limits of the data this research uncovered.

The need for such reflection has motivated this essay. In it, I present a relatively detailed summary of the millennial views of Campbell and Stone and a brief survey of similar views maintained by their heirs that demonstrate three things: the apocalyptic, new-creation eschatology of both pre- and postmillennialists in the nineteenth-century SCM, the absence of amillennialism among them, and the refusal to divide over millennial views. Finally, I suggest that a twentieth-century transformation of editorial praxis played a decisive role in fostering the division over premillennialism and that we should reaffirm the earlier spirit.

The Millennium in the Nineteenth-Century Pioneers

The SCM in the nineteenth century was characterized by the apocalypticism that permeated the American religious landscape. Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone disagreed on certain chronological and ontological aspects of Christian eschatology, yet together they opposed the extremes of setting specific dates for Christ's return as did popular millenarians such as William Miller. Their most powerful and unifying agreement perceived the Scriptures to promise a future, glorious renovation of the creation and its personal and societal structures.

Campbell's Millennium

Alexander Campbell's millennium was a very real thousand years of triumphant Christianity upon the earth; this he believed the Scriptures clearly promised.⁴ He defined it as a political and religious order of society that would accomplish the ultimate improvement of humans and their world.⁵ Like Irenaeus and other ancient chiliasts, he saw the natural environment as undergoing a pronounced transformation with the fecundity of the earth and the pleasantness of the climates extremely enhanced during that time. Society also would be greatly improved, with no more war and with general peace and harmony in all human relationships.

His millennium included a spiritual transformation that he thought would be manifested in the Lord's being exalted as never before and in the highest level of human spirituality ever realized. The Jews would be converted, and the fulness of the Gentiles would enter the kingdom as Christianity spread thoroughly through all nations. Campbell believed that

The millennium . . . would be a state of greatly enlarged and continued prosperity. . . . The seasons will become more mild; the climates more salubrious, health more vigorous . . . lands more fertile, and animal creation more prolific. . . .

⁴ A. Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger* 13 (1843), 74, quoted in Royal Humbert, *A Compend of Alexander Campbell's Theology* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1961), 265. *Millennial Harbinger* is hereinafter cited as *MH*.

⁵ A. Campbell, "Prospectus," *MH* 1 (July 1830): 1.

Crimes and punishments will cease; governments will recognize human rights, and will rest on benevolent principles.⁶

This millennial age would not be a new age, but the completion of the current Christian age. Campbell divided history into three dispensations, or kingdoms. He located the Jewish kingdom in the past, the Christian kingdom in the present, and the kingdom not yet realized he appropriately dubbed the future kingdom: it was the heavenly abode of God, angels, glorified saints, and mansions of glory. Since his millennium would be earthly and precede the general resurrection, judgment, and beginning of the future kingdom, it would exist as a distinct part within, and the ultimate conclusion of, the Christian kingdom.⁷ Campbell perceived the inauguration of the millennium to be in the near future, but in the future nonetheless.⁸

The power that would usher in this future golden age would not be that of civil governments. He believed that there

can be no radical amelioration of society under the influences which now govern the world. . . . No kingdom now on earth can be regarded as a kingdom of our Lord, because *they were all founded by the sword*. . . . But this state of things is not to survive.⁹

Even the best worldly governments were believed to have within them the seeds of their own destruction, namely, the refusal to submit to Christ as their sovereign.¹⁰ But neither would the millennium be inaugurated by the second coming of Christ.¹¹

While Campbell believed that God would cause the millennium, he did not believe God would be the direct cause. The millennium would be established as God worked through his agents, the world's living Christians.¹² As one of those Christians, Campbell accepted his responsibility to participate in this activity. His major contribution would be through the *MH*, a monthly

⁶ A. Campbell, *MH* 11 (1841), 9, quoted in Humbert, *A Compend*, 268–69; see also A. Campbell, "Prospectus," *MH* 1 (July 1830): 1, where Campbell sees the political aspects of the millennium almost entirely in terms of social justice.

⁷ A. Campbell, "The Three Kingdoms," *The Christian Baptist* 4 (1826): 97–100.

⁸ A. Campbell, "Prospectus," *MH* 1 (July 1830): 1; idem, *The Christian System* (Cincinnati: H. S. Bosworth, 1866), 291. This idea is underscored by the fact that the amillennial view now dominates Churches of Christ. Campbell noted the existence of amillennialism, but he did not speak of it in a favorable light at all. I will discuss this in more detail later.

⁹ A. Campbell, *MH* 3 (1833), 121–22, quoted in Humbert, *A Compend*, 271–72.

¹⁰ A. Campbell, *The Christian System*, 291.

¹¹ For Campbell, the millennium was near, but Christ's coming was not; if Christ came soon, it would preclude the thousand years of triumphant Christianity he expected prior to Christ's return (Humbert, *A Compend*, 265; *MH* 13 [1843]: 74).

¹² A. Campbell, *The Christian System*, 292.

periodical whose stated goal was “the development and introduction of . . . the MILLENNIUM.”¹³

One of the main objectives integral to the accomplishment of that goal was the cessation of sectarian Christianity. The influence of the Enlightenment upon Campbell has been generally accepted, and it becomes manifest in the imagery he used to paint his picture of the means to defeat sectarianism and usher in the millennium: “[T]he first step towards this glorious age is to dissipate the darkness which covers the people and hides their eyes from the Sun . . . of Mercy.”¹⁴

To do this, informing humanity through education was integral: “The human mind must be emancipated from the bondage of human error, and information not only augmented, but extended to all the community.” Though Campbell affirmed the importance and usefulness of the liberal arts, the primary content of this “information” he mentioned was the “Ancient Gospel, freed from sects, dogmas, and creeds.”¹⁵ His call to Christians was a call to spiritual arms raised in a revolutionary effort that he thought was of greater importance than the American Revolution.

He firmly believed that the “emancipation of the human mind from the shackles of superstition, and the introduction of human beings into the full fruition of the reign of heaven” could be hastened.¹⁶ That “last and most beneficial change in society”—the millennium—would come sooner if preachers would “let the gospel, in its own plainness, simplicity, and force, speak to men. . . . [For] in its power it will pass from heart to heart . . . from city to city, until it bless the whole earth.”¹⁷ This preaching of the Ancient Gospel would refrain from making inferential doctrines tests of fellowship.¹⁸ Since Campbell saw the binding of such creeds on human consciences as the cause of sectarianism, he believed that Christian unity would result as people were loosed from them. When this occurred, the millennium would be realized.

¹³ Idem., “Prospectus.”

¹⁴ Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); C. Leonard Allen, *Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church* (Abilene, Tex.: ACU Press, 1993); and others.

¹⁵ A. Campbell, “Prefatory Remarks,” *MH* 1 (July 1830): 5.

¹⁶ A. Campbell, *Popular Lectures and Addresses*, quoted in Humbert, *A Compend*, 274.

¹⁷ Campbell’s anthropology here seems to betray a very high view of man, while elsewhere he speaks of man in terms of total depravity. A. Campbell, *Popular Lectures and Addresses*, quoted in Humbert, *A Compend*, 274–75.

¹⁸ See Proposition 6 of Thomas Campbell’s *Declaration and Address* (1809), ed. F. D. Kirshner (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1955), 46.

At times Campbell has been categorized as a premillennialist by those who sought to invoke the force of his reputation to promote or defend their eschatology. Edward V. Wood, Stanford Chambers, and Robert Shank of the Churches of Christ, and J. Frank Norris, a fundamentalist Baptist, all attributed premillennialism to Campbell.¹⁹ However, they were mistaken. The quotations of Campbell often cited in support of their conclusions certainly contained *millennial* language, but they wrongly assumed that Campbell meant by his millennial terms the same thing premillennialists mean.

For example, Campbell certainly did speak, at times, of the millennium as an earthly reign of Christ; but in its context his phrase does not possess the premillennial meaning that understands Christ as physically present during his reign. Campbell reasoned that Christ could not come before the millennium; thus he could not be reigning in physical presence during it. If he did come before the millennium, Campbell said, "there could be no thousand years triumph of Christianity, because the events that are to follow in instant succession upon his coming preclude any further conflict between truth and error."²⁰ Campbell thought that Christ would establish the millennial kingdom and reign with his saints by means of evangelical influences.²¹ However, this is not the only millennial language in Campbell that has been wrongly interpreted as premillennial. The premillennialists mentioned above also noted that Campbell understood Rev 20:1–7 as teaching two resurrections, one marking the beginning of the millennium and one the end. But they overlooked Campbell's interpretation of those resurrections. To him they were "both figurative [resurrections] . . . not *bodies*, but *souls* quickened, animated, and elevated by the Spirit of God . . . and . . . to be contrasted with the literal and true resurrection."²² Only one "literal and true resurrection" would take place, in Campbell's thought, and that would happen after the millennium, at a general resurrection just prior to the great Judgment.

Campbell was confident in the validity of his millennial view. He openly and vigorously argued against premillennialists, like his friend Barton W. Stone. Yet he respected their views and willingly published essays in his journal that argued premillennial understandings. His respect for premillennialism seems to have been grounded, at least in part, in the agreement it

¹⁹ Edward V. Wood, *A Brief History of Premillennialism* (Dallas: n.p.), 12–15 (photocopy); Stanford Chambers, "Knowing of Whom Thou Hast Learned," *Word and Work* (n.s.), 122–23 (photocopy); Robert Shank, "The Biblical and Historical Foundations of Premillennialism," *Restoration Review* 25 (Feb. 1983): 26; and J. Frank Norris, *The Norris-Wallace Debate* (n.p.: Fundamentalist Publishing Co., 1935).

²⁰ A. Campbell, *MH* 11 (1841): 97–98, quoted in Humbert, *A Compend*, 286.

²¹ A. Campbell, "The Millennium—No. I," *MH* 1 (July 1830): 53–58.

²² *MH* 11 (1941): 99–101, quoted in Royal Humbert, *A Compend*, 282.

shared with his own postmillennialism. That agreement was the hope in a future earthly millennium.

Campbell's view of amillennialism creates serious tension with the fact that amillennialism is dogma in many of the churches that recognize him as a founder in their heritage. The sympathetic treatment he gave to eschatologies with which he disagreed, but which did hope for a future millennium, did not extend to amillennialism. The latter view he saw as a doctrine held by "ecclesiastic and political . . . scoffers. . . ." ²³ To Campbell, their amillennialism demonstrated "their love for this present evil world and their want of affection for the Messiah and his kingdom."²⁴ Campbell noted in particular the aspect of the amillennial view that understands Satan as having been bound since Christ's first advent and as remaining bound during the entire gospel age until the return of Christ.²⁵ In his mind this clashed with the reality of evil in the world and led him to conclude: "To us it appears . . . strange how anyone well read in sacred learning, could imagine Satan has been bound for the last thousand years, and that we have had a reign of Christ a thousand years."²⁶ This conflict between the views of an important founder and contemporary churches in his heritage should at least pique the interest of contemporaries in reevaluating their assumptions and in reevaluating the level of dogmatism they have attached to certain aspects of eschatology.

In any event, the data have strongly suggested that Campbell was a postmillennialist, a product of Enlightenment optimism and a zeal for Christian unity based on the rational exposition of the Bible. His millennial view was specific and decidedly this-worldly. He was a product neither of a worldly materialism nor of fancy misguided by some contemporary religious fad.²⁷ Campbell rejected the sensational date-setting activities of popular

²³ A. Campbell, "Miller's Creed," *MH* 7 (1837): 121.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Cf. Hoekema in Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977), 161-64.

²⁶ A. Campbell, "Millenarians," *MH* 7 (1837): 231.

²⁷ A. Campbell, "Materialism," *MH*. Among Churches of Christ, at times, opponents to views that posit a future millennium have demonstrated a low view of material creation and intimated that such millennial hopes are worldly or materialistic. An example of such insinuation appears in a recent anti-dispensationalism article by Hugo McCord, professor emeritus of Oklahoma Christian University. McCord asserts: "Biblically based Christians do not look forward to living in a *corrupted and defiled* Palestine for 1,000 years. . . . [T]hey resolutely set their 'mind on things that are above, not on the things that are on the earth' [emphasis added]." "That Beautiful Land," *Gospel Advocate* 137 (March 1995): 55. To McCord, apparently, Campbell, Stone, Lipscomb, Harding, McGarvey, Brents, *et al.*, were not "biblically based Christians." See also A. Campbell, "Miller's Creed." Note also the

millenarians such as William Miller: "a well balanced and well informed mind," said Campbell, would never presume "to fix the era of Christ's coming."²⁸ Further, Campbell was no worldly materialist. He simply believed the apocalyptic notion of an earthly millennium to be grounded in Scripture.

Stone's Millennium

While Barton W. Stone differed from Campbell on certain important points, he, too, believed the Scriptures pointed to an earthly millennium. Generally speaking, Stone's eschatology was not unique. It was in most respects typical, nineteenth-century, evangelical, historicist premillennialism. Like Campbell, Stone believed that the millennium of Revelation 20 signified a future, glorious, one-thousand-year period on earth during which nothing harmful would exist.²⁹ He allowed, however, that the interpretation of the actual duration of that millennium was open to variation. To Stone, it seemed probable that the years spoken of "may have been prophetic years, (which are reckoned a year for a day, Ezek. 5, 6,), . . . [making] the millennium . . . measure 365,000 years."³⁰

During that time, none of the wicked from any nation would remain on the earth to be converted. They would not live to see that day because they would be judged and their death-sentence executed at the commencement of the millennium.³¹ The earth would then be populated only by resurrected and transformed saints. There would be no "increase of men by ordinary generation" since "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are equal to the angels"; further,

if mankind in the resurrection with spiritual bodies increase their species, their children cannot join the redeemed from sin and death in their worship and songs of praise. How can they praise the Lord for redemption from sin and death, when they had never been under their power?³²

While Stone pictured a transformed millennium free from all harm, he differed from Campbell in that he spent little time describing the nature of the millennium in detailed terms of the transformations of nature, human society,

similarity McCord's seemingly low view of material creation may share with Gnosticism.

²⁸ *MH* 12 (1842), 305, quoted in Humbert, *A Compend*, 285.

²⁹ A. Campbell, "Miller's Creed."

³⁰ Barton W. Stone, "The Millennium," *The Christian Messenger* 7 (Oct. 1833): 312.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 313.

³² *Ibid.*; also *idem.*, "An Extract from a Letter from Elder Wm. Caldwell of Tupper's Plain, Ohio, and Barton W. Stone's Reply," *Christian Messenger* 7 (Dec. 1833): 366. One might hasten to suggest that the holy angels, never fallen, never redeemed, join with the saints to worship God.

and spirituality. In contrast, however, Stone contributed more effort to exegesis of eschatological Scriptures whose meanings were contested. Some of his most extensive work appeared in response to challenges to his beliefs in the return of Christ at the beginning of the thousand years, and in two, real, bodily resurrections.

For instance, Stone believed that Jesus would come in his glory at the very commencement of the millennium. At that time he would destroy all the wicked nations of the earth and bind Satan for the duration of the thousand years.³³ The martyrs and all the saints who died in faith, he said, "shall rise, live and reign with Christ 1,000 years. This is the first resurrection." Stone's sensitivity to prominent objections to the teaching that all the saints shall reign with Christ prompted him to respond to those objections in his exposition. For example, the interpretation that only the martyrs are to be raised, live, and reign with Christ, Stone opposed as inconsistent both with the specific context of Revelation and with the broader NT context. He developed an exposition of 1 Cor 15:23 and 1 Thess 4:15-18 to establish (1) the temporal separation between the resurrection and transformation of Christ, the resurrection and transformation of dead believers, and the transformation of those believers who are living when Christ returns; (2) the temporal order inherent in the grammar of these texts; and (3) the conspicuous absence from these passages of any reference to the resurrection of the wicked.³⁴

At the end of the millennium, he saw that Satan would be released and the wicked raised from the dead in the second resurrection. Satan will deceive his old minions (now resurrected) once again. He will gather them into a vast army to conquer Jesus. At the very moment their assembly is accomplished, they will be judged and suffer God's eternal, fiery vengeance. Again anticipating objections to his interpretation, Stone addressed them. Some who advocated one general, simultaneous resurrection of all the dead would draw support for their view from John 5:28-29, in which Jesus says, "the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs shall hear his voice and come forth. . . ." The argument was founded on a rather literal understanding of the word *hour* and concluded from it that all the dead, wicked, and righteous would be resurrected during that short period of time. Stone viewed their interpretation as flawed in that it neglected its own immediate context, particularly verse 25, which speaks of the *hour* of the new birth. If "the hour of hearing the voice of Jesus in the gospel has continued 1800 years," Stone asked, "why not the hour spoken of in John v. 28, continue 1000 years?"³⁵

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 314.

While he unabashedly pointed out what he saw as argument and exegetical errors, Stone's humility regarding the interpretation of the millennium was clearly expressed at the end of his exchange on that topic with the postmillennialist Elder William Caldwell. Stone wrote: "Difficulties, it is acknowledged, attach to the doctrine of the millennium; and such that we may not be able to solve. But shall we, therefore, conclude that nothing can be certainly known concerning it? I am very far from being positive in all my positions; but of some I entertain no doubt.—Our wisdom is to be always ready."³⁶ Accompanying this humility was an irenic spirit that may be seen in a comment he made about disagreements in the interpretation of the coming of Jesus: "Yet a short time, and all [difficulties] will be cleared. It is not absolutely necessary to our salvation, whether of the two systems we believe."³⁷

This humble and peaceable spirit regarding the interpretation of prophecy was reflected in Campbell as well, and it would characterize the leaders of the SCM for the remainder of the nineteenth century. Divergent beliefs in a literal earthly millennium would permeate the eschatological thought of the great Restoration leaders of that century, and there would be no breach of fellowship between them on this issue. The last comment by Stone in the preceding paragraph demonstrates another similarity with Campbell. In acknowledging only "two systems" (postmillennial and premillennial), Stone, like Campbell, gave no place for amillennialism.

The Millennium in the Leadership of Subsequent Generations

The men who would rise to positions of prominence in the SCM in subsequent generations also carried with them the hope of a future earthly millennium. Several held a premillennial outlook, while others seemed postmillennial. The premillennialists included Moses Lard,³⁸ David Lipscomb,³⁹

³⁶ Stone, "Barton W. Stone to Elder William Caldwell," *Christian Messenger* 8 (May 1834): 148.

³⁷ Stone, "The Coming of the Son of God," *Christian Messenger* 12 (April 1842): 169.

³⁸ Lard affirmed that "Christ will literally come in person at the commencement of the millennium." At that time, "all who sleep in Jesus will rise" to be with Him, who would "literally remain here on earth during the entire thousand years." During that time, "Satan is bound and locked up in prison . . . for the exact period of a thousand years. . . . During [which, his] power is wholly unfelt by man." "The rest of the dead, who are the wicked dead, will not be raised until the end" of the Millennium. See comments by David Lipscomb in Earl Irvin West, *The Search for the Ancient Order* (Germantown, Tenn.: Religious Book Service, 1990), 1.287f. Moses Lard, "A Theory of the Millennium," *Lard's Quarterly* 2 (Oct. 1865): 9–11.

³⁹ While the data from Lipscomb seem scarce and the same texts used repeatedly, Edward Wood's and Robert Shank's interpretations of him are in harmony with the most recent conclusions of Richard Hughes. "Lipscomb did clearly contend that

James A. Harding,⁴⁰ and T. W. Brents.⁴¹ The language of the following men seemed postmillennial. However, the data do not lend themselves to a dogmatic conclusion. They do, however, undoubtedly suggest that these men possessed a new creation eschatology that hoped for a future blessed millennial state on earth. Included in this group were Tolbert Fanning,⁴² J. W. McGarvey,⁴³ Robert Milligan,⁴⁴ and E. G. Sewell.⁴⁵

Jesus' return to earth will precede and inaugurate the final Golden age of God's rule on earth. . . . Lipscomb explicitly spoke of a 'reign of Jesus on the earth.'" Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 124–25.

⁴⁰ Robert Shank, citing the Oct. 15, 1903, issue of *The Way*, quoted Harding as follows: "During this time, this thousand years, Christ and his saints reign; but the rest of the dead live not again till the thousand years have expired. This, the resurrection of the righteous, is the first resurrection. . . . That this millennial reign will be on earth is clearly indicated." Robert Shank, "The Biblical and Historical Foundations of Premillennialism," *Restoration Review* 25 (Feb. 1983): 28; Hughes said of Harding, "no one within Churches of Christ embraced premillennial eschatology with more fervor than did James A. Harding," *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 137.

⁴¹ Citing Brents's 1891 volume *Gospel Sermons*, Wood included this quotation from Brents' exposition of Rev 20:4: "This is the Millennium! If it does not express a literal reign with Christ for a literal thousand years, we know not what assemblage of words would be capable of expressing that thought. We have seen that the dead in Christ rise first, and that this is the first resurrection in which none but the blessed and holy will have a part. . . . And the sentence, 'the dead in Christ shall rise first' implies that the dead out of Christ shall rise afterward . . . when the thousand years shall be finished." Edward V. Wood, *A Brief History of Premillennialism* (Dallas: n.p., n.d.), 11 (photocopy).

⁴² Tolbert Fanning founded the *Gospel Advocate* in 1855 with William Lipscomb, elder brother of David Lipscomb. The magazine ceased during the Civil War, but Fanning began it again in 1866 with David Lipscomb as co-editor. Millennial differences did not divide them. Fanning believed an earthly millennium would come when "the subjects of Christ's kingdom will really subjugate, overcome, and put down by the Gospel of peace all of Satan's subjects who can be saved; and afterwards, the Lord will reign with his people a thousand years." Tolbert Fanning, "The Coming of the Lord," *Gospel Advocate* (Sept. 1866): quoted in Shank, "Biblical and Historical Foundations." Hughes recognized "abundant evidence that [Fanning's] outlook was profoundly apocalyptic" (Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 118).

⁴³ Lard and McGarvey stood together on the major issues that faced the SCM during their era (West, *Search*, 1.287). McGarvey's language parallels much of Campbell's and thus suggests postmillennialism. While this conclusion is disputed, there is little doubt that McGarvey held faith in a future earthly millennium. Referring to Amos 9:11–15, McGarvey said, "This refers undoubtedly to the reign of Christ, in which the throne of David is restored. . . . All this is yet in the future, and it is to occur under the reign of the risen and glorified Son of David." J. W. McGarvey, "Why Are the Jews Yet with Us?" *The Christian Standard* (1903),

These prominent leaders in the SCM's inaugural century believed themselves to be devoted to God and his Word. They were devoted to the unity of Christianity upon the Scriptures alone. And the recognition of these devotions by their twentieth-century spiritual heirs has kept these founders in places of high esteem. Yet in contrast to many of their modern heirs, they also believed staunchly that the Scriptures promised an earthly millennium that still remained in the future. Another contrast is that though their eschatologies diverged at significant points, all these men continued in the spirit of Campbell and Stone before them, seeing no scriptural warrant for making their eschatological views bases of fellowship. However, this was not to remain the case.

The Suppression and Rejection of a Future Millennial Hope

Postmillennialism suffered as people experienced the horrors of the Civil War, World War I, and the Great Depression; each of these traumatic social upheavals chipped away at its optimistic view of human capability and social progress. And with its demise came the concomitant decline in the number of people and church groups who hoped in a future millennium. But why the demise of premillennialism among Churches of Christ at a time when it was gaining respectability as a viable, credible evangelical option?

Some have concluded that the strife was not with premillennialism *per se*, but with Classical Dispensationalism. This theological system tended to view the NT church as an *ad hoc* reaction by God to Israel's rejection of the Messiah, and thus as something that was not purposed by God before the foundation of the world. With the important place given to the church in the theology of the Churches of Christ, that they perceived this to be a threat to their faith is certainly possible. In reading the debates and articles produced during the heat of the division, one will find in the arguments fallacies of attribution, demagoguery, and other unethical rhetoric. The theories regarding the reasons for the division seem to be many and remain to be more thoroughly substantiated. But each of them will be linked in some way to the events surrounding what Richard Hughes called "The R. H. Boll Affair."⁴⁶

quoted in Shank, "Biblical and Historical Foundations," 28.

⁴⁴ Milligan believed that the "world to come means . . . the habitable world under the reign and government of the Messiah . . . the world in which we now live." Robert Milligan, *Commentary on Hebrews* (1875), quoted in Shank, "Biblical and Historical Foundations," 28.

⁴⁵ Sewell affirmed "there will be . . . a . . . 1,000 years reign . . . before the final end of this world," as did postmillennial Campbell. Although Sewell's meaning is obscure, that he held to a future millennial hope is certain. E. G. Sewell, *Gospel Advocate* (April 1900), quoted in Shank, "Biblical and Historical Foundations," 28.

⁴⁶ Hughes, 141.

R. H. Boll was a premillennialist like many others in the Stone-Campbell tradition before him. His Christian spirit was nurtured in the Nashville Bible School at the feet of premillennial James A. Harding. At the turn of the century, Boll was writing about premillennialism as associate editor of Harding's *Christian Leader and the Way*. In 1909 he was chosen to be front-page editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, the most widely circulated periodical among Churches of Christ at the time. There he continued to write about the coming of the Lord and the millennial hope, among other topics. Over the course of years a change began to manifest itself in Churches of Christ as some readers and Boll's fellow editors began to complain about his teaching on prophetic themes. By the close of 1915, he was forced from the *Advocate* because of his millennial views. By the end of 1930, Boll and his premillennial beliefs were viewed as dangerous. Finally, this danger began to be called heresy, and Boll a heretic. An editorial and ecclesio-political campaign so vigorous was waged against him and premillennialism that even those who were not premillennialists were attacked if they did not clearly and openly oppose Boll or premillennial eschatology. College presidents, professors, elders, ministers, laymen, and churches wishing to avoid the developing negative publicity that accompanied being associated with Boll or this eschatological view joined in the denouncement of premillennialism.

Premillennial eschatology had been suppressed and limited to a diminishing number of congregations, a people forced out of the main stream and shunned. They have remained marginalized ever since. Not only had the church divided; she had repudiated, in some way, nearly all of her pioneers.⁴⁷ Premillennialists and postmillennialists—those who held the common hope in a future earthly millennium—with their concomitant disagreements, had historically permeated the SCM and had done so without a rupture of fellowship. The causes of the twentieth-century division were likely many. But the one that seemed to provide the initial impetus was the flexing of informal ecclesiastical muscle.

A Transformation in Editorial Praxis

Theological Direction in the Church

Because it may seem strange to begin a discussion regarding church authority by focusing on editorial philosophy, some explanation seems in order. As the Churches of Christ claimed a non-denominational posture, they

⁴⁷ See Robert Hooper, *A Distinct People* (West Monroe, La.: Howard, 1993); Richard Hughes *Reviving the Ancient Faith*; Thomas Bradshaw, *R. H. Boll: Controversy and Accomplishment among Churches of Christ* (Louisville: Word and Work, 1998); and David Owen, "The Premillennial Movement in the Church of Christ" (M.A. thesis, Murray State University, 1989).

rejected formal hierarchical ecclesiastical structures outside congregational bounds. But they were not without an informal hierarchy that wielded immense controlling influence. W. T. Moore illuminated the major source of theological influence in this tradition when he said, "the Disciples of Christ do not have bishops, they have editors."⁴⁸ Leroy Garrett called them "The Editor Bishops."⁴⁹

Ironically, in a church claiming that congregational elders were the ultimate authoritative ecclesiastical offices explicitly empowered by the Bible, its unique non-denominational stance contributed to the endowment of editorial positions with far more power than any elder or group of elders would ever exercise. That power was wielded sometimes faithfully; sometimes, however, it struck in more domineering ways than that of the magisteria of churches with more detailed power structures. But how could that happen in a group committed to the unity of the church through the restoration of biblical Christianity?

The historical development of the church has always in some way been influenced by sociological, political, and personal forces. In the case of Churches of Christ, with no formal ecclesiastical structure or cooperative arrangement to facilitate the peaceful solving of problems at a fellowship-wide level, disturbances tend to lead to polarization rather than reconciliation.⁵⁰

When a situation of doctrinal dichotomy arises, therefore, congregations, groups, and individuals tend to take sides, drifting into orbit around one of the two views' concentrations of power. Those concentrations of power may be men, journals, or institutions such as Bible colleges, universities, or seminaries that represent a particular school of thought. Congregations and individual Christians tend to develop a "nebulous sort of group consciousness by identifying with the outstanding institutions supporting their position."⁵¹ In my research, one grouping of those concentrations of power that greatly influenced the division over premillennialism seemed to be religious periodicals, their publishers, and their editors.

In a fellowship that lacks a commitment to a more formal method of conflict resolution, the editors of the most popular journals of the Churches of Christ, such as the *Gospel Advocate* and *Firm Foundation*, became the

⁴⁸ Quoted in Hughes, 10.

⁴⁹ Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (rev.; Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1994), 307f.

⁵⁰ The SCM has historically interpreted 1 Corinthians 6 as applicable only to the autonomous congregations. Ironically, in my experience it never has been practiced at that level.

⁵¹ David Edwin Harrell, *Quest for a Christian America* (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1966), 9, quoted in Owen, "The Premillennialist Movement," 45.

overseers of the church through their magazines—the “outstanding institutions” by which people were swayed and with which the majority eventually identified. As such, these papers wielded a unique power to influence the theological track of the church. One member of the Churches of Christ, William T. Owen, acknowledged the potential power of the editors when he wrote to the *Firm Foundation* regarding the *Advocate*: “The *Advocate* has been ruling the church with a high hand, and if you can break this ecclesiastical body in the church, that alone, I think, will have been one of the outstanding accomplishments of this generation.”⁵²

The Old Paths: Early Restoration Editorial Philosophies

The twentieth-century influence of journals such as the *Advocate* was directed by a much different editorial spirit from that of their nineteenth-century predecessors. At Alexander Campbell’s 1823 establishment of *The Christian Baptist*, he viewed the journal as one “pledged to no religious sect in Christendom.” Its aim was “the eviction of truth and the exposure of error.”⁵³ In some sense, Campbell recognized this as an unprecedented venture. To him it was an “experiment” that would test “whether a paper . . . free from any controlling jurisdiction except the bible [*sic*], will be read; or whether it will be blasted by the poisonous breath of sectarian zeal.”⁵⁴ This statement seems to reflect both a noble ideal and a noble experiment. Campbell may have recognized that the power of this ideal combined with the power of human sinfulness had the potential to transform any paper into a dogmatic, sectarian power. After all, he knew that the cry of *sola scriptura* had been broadcast with wide acceptance among Protestants since the earliest engines of the Reformation began to move; and that, even so, Protestantism divided, and continued to divide, while voicing the same cry. As for his journal’s being “free from any controlling jurisdiction but the bible,” the pursuit of such an ideal seemed relatively impractical, if not impossible, unless one provided for

⁵² Quoted in Hooper, *A Distinct People*, 139.

⁵³ Alexander Campbell, “Preface to the First Edition,” *The Christian Baptist* 1 (July 1823): 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* Campbell’s later periodical, *MH*, was devoted to similar ends as *The Christian Baptist*. But by the time he published the *Harbinger*, Campbell’s eschatology, particularly his millennial views, had developed to the point that they were a powerful motive in his spiritual life. This power moved him to devote the *Harbinger* “to the destruction of sectarianism, infidelity, and antichristian doctrine and practice.” For Campbell, the healing of divisions within Christianity would usher in the millennium on the earth. Thus in practice, the *Harbinger* was controlled not only by the Bible, but to some extent by Campbell’s postmillennial dream.

checks and balances.⁵⁵ Campbell and others saw the need for such checks and balances and incorporated them into the constitutions of their journals.

Campbell, Stone, Fanning, and Lipscomb all gave birth to and shaped their journals as forums in which different views would be discussed. They apparently recognized their human potential to err and therefore designed their journals as forums, thus placing limitations on their own power. Printing opposing and dissenting views would help prevent the papers and the men from becoming sectarian, single-issue oriented, or one-sided and hegemonic. Campbell formally canonized this part of his editorial philosophy by publishing it in the first edition of the *Christian Baptist*. He wrote:

We have only to add in this place, that we shall thankfully receive such essays as are accordant with the Bible and suitable to the peculiar design of this paper; and if any essays, short and well composed, written in opposition to our views, should be forwarded, they shall be inserted, accompanied with appropriate remarks.⁵⁶

This practice Campbell continued even in the *MH*. Though a postmillennialist, he presented one Mr. Nesbit's twelve premillennial "reasons why the prophecies relating to the second coming of Christ should be literally interpreted." Mr. Nesbit's views, though opposed to Campbell's, were, in Campbell's words, "worthy of candid consideration."⁵⁷ Barton W. Stone also published the views of those who differed from him. One example is the publication of items by Elder William Caldwell, discussed earlier, that opposed Stone's premillennialism.⁵⁸ When Tolbert Fanning and William Lipscomb established the *Gospel Advocate* in 1855, Fanning viewed the *Advocate* as a forum for the free discussion of issues, pro and con.⁵⁹ In the *Advocate's* prospectus, Lipscomb and Fanning wrote: "Their motto shall be, 'Open columns and free discussion of all questions calculated to advance the spiritual interest of society.'"⁶⁰ Campbell supported the *Advocate* and

⁵⁵ In any such endeavor, the human overseers of the work—whether a board of men, editors, or publishers—will exercise their control over the publication. In Campbell's case, his theological agenda controlled his journal; this is not necessarily a negative phenomenon.

⁵⁶ A. Campbell, "Preface to the First Edition," 3.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Wood, *A Brief History*, 13; cf. Norris, *The Norris-Wallace Debate*. Campbell also published a protracted series of articles written from a premillennial perspective by a layman named McCorkle.

⁵⁸ William Caldwell and Barton Stone, "An Extract from Elder Wm. Caldwell of Tupper's Plain, Ohio, and Barton W. Stone's Reply," *Christian Messenger* 7 (Dec. 1833): 365–67; William Caldwell, "Letter to the Editors of the Christian Messenger," *Christian Messenger* 8 (May 1834):140–45.

⁵⁹ West, *The Search*, 1.205.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 267.

promoted it in his *MH*, likely because its editors displayed an editorial philosophy similar to his own.⁶¹

Departing the Old Paths: Twentieth-Century Editorial Praxis

With a view toward promoting truth in general and with the specific goals of fostering the gospel of the grace of God and the unity of the church, the editorial philosophies of these influential nineteenth-century pioneers reflected a shared desire that their magazines present a holistic and balanced discussion of issues.⁶² By the early twentieth century, however, the editors of the *Gospel Advocate* and other journals would begin to discard this desire for open discussion. The effects of this transformation made their first bold appearance in the dismissal of Robert H. Boll from the staff of the *Advocate* because of his premillennial eschatology. That action symbolized a key aspect of the changing nature of the journals, and eventually of the churches: a growing rejection of evangelicalism for a separatist-confessionalism. The “premillennial controversy” in the Churches of Christ, which would eventually lead to division, had begun. This new type of editorial philosophy helped drive this wedge in the church; therefore, it must be held at least partially responsible for the division.

R. H. Boll was known to hold and teach premillennial views prior to his appointment as an editor of the *Advocate* in 1909. However, by 1915, Boll’s fellow editors saw him as “speculating” about “unrevealed things” and asked him to cease.⁶³ But Boll was not a conformist.⁶⁴ He believed strongly in his commission as a minister to teach the whole counsel of God, as he understood it, rather than to submit to a policy of obscurantism.⁶⁵ Boll was finally given an ultimatum: cease his premillennial teaching or be dismissed from the *Advocate*. He was dismissed.⁶⁶ In this unprecedented action, the editors of the *Advocate* repudiated the Christian spirit and editorial philosophy of its founders and the pioneers in general. Further, in the removal of Boll, hostilities against premillennialism were inaugurated and canonized, setting a precedent for the imitation of such behavior. Later, as the war against this eschatology escalated, Boll recognized the departure from the old paths, and he articulated this warning in a letter to N. B. Hardeman:

⁶¹ *MH* (June 1855), 358, quoted in West, *The Search*, 1.267.

⁶² West, *The Search*, 1.267.

⁶³ Thomas Bradshaw, *R. H. Boll: Controversy and Accomplishment among Churches of Christ* (Louisville: Word and Work, 1998), 12–14.

⁶⁴ Alex V. Wilson, “R. H. Boll as a Writer and Editor” (Christian Scholars Conference, 1998):1.

⁶⁵ Bradshaw, *R. H. Boll*, 12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 15–22.

[I]f we are unable to handle such a difference as this without division or disruption of fellowship we must evermore cease to preach unity to the denominational world; and if we make our prophetic views . . . an article of faith, to be subscribed to in order to fellowship, we forfeit the right to the name of the simple church of Christ, and must . . . adopt a sectarian designation to indicate that we are Christians of a certain creed.⁶⁷

The controlling parties—the publishers and editors of the *Advocate* and other popular journals, and to some extent, their contributors—had exchanged their publications' heritage as forums of *fides quaerens intellectum* for the role of promoting their own theological hegemony. As such, they lost interest in the open discussion of views that had been the hallmark of the editorial praxis of their founders. Their motives had evolved from evangelical to separatist-confessional, from biblical to traditional, and they had become issue oriented and one-sided.

Conclusion

Churches of Christ have become a divided unity movement. This certainly underscores the depth of human sinfulness in the church itself. But the paradox need not be propagated. Something went wrong—perhaps many things. What, then, should we do about our eschatological differences?

To paraphrase premillennial George Eldon Ladd and postmillennial Lorraine Boettner, who, like Campbell and Stone, worked somewhat side by side (i.e., writing in the same book), disagreement does not mean heresy. The millennium is a question about which Evangelical Christians who accept the Bible as the inspired word of God should be able to disagree without such an accusation and without dividing the body of Christ. The differences between millennial views should be treated as comparative nonessentials. Two important facts should be remembered: (1) Evangelical millennialists and amillennialists agree on the inspiration and authority of Scripture but differ in their understandings of it; and (2) they also agree in their belief in a first and second coming of Christ, both of which are personal, visible, glorious, and objective.⁶⁸

These two modern Evangelicals, at points, seem to display more of a restoration spirit than do some professed adherents of the SCM. For instance, Boettner's statement on the issue of eschatology and fellowship is worth noting, especially the closing citation—a favorite of many in the SCM:

[T]he church has debated and reached conclusions and has embodied these conclusions in her creeds as the . . . great doctrines of the faith. But the subject

⁶⁷ Quoted in Wilson, "R. H. Boll," 4.

⁶⁸ In Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1977), 20 (Ladd) and 140–42 (Boettner).

of eschatology still remains in dispute. The manner of Christ's return and the kind of kingdom he is setting up or will set up in this world is not agreed upon. For this reason the church in practically all her branches has refused to make any one of the millennial interpretations an article of the creed and has preferred rather to accept as Christian brothers all those who believe in the fact of Christ's coming. Hence, while personally we may have very definite views concerning the manner and time of his coming, it would seem that our motto should be, "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity."⁶⁹

The most powerful prospect one can hold out for reconciliation and for the future in general is that we listen to one another. Jürgen Moltmann contends: If we will not speak with one another, we will soon shoot at one another.⁷⁰ The editors and publishers of our religious journals who have not yet done so should claim an editorial philosophy that promotes such conversation as did the pioneers of the nineteenth-century Restoration Movement, and Christian leaders in general should recognize that the truth has nothing to fear. Forums for the open discussion of theology will not harm the cause of truth, but rather promote it. To paraphrase the wisdom of Gamaliel, we should not blindly oppose men with whom we disagree: if what they teach is not of God, it will fail; if it is of God, we do not want to oppose it (Acts 5:35-39).

⁶⁹ Boettner in Clouse, ed., *The Meaning*, 141.

⁷⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, "Directives for Theological Reflection, *Thesis Theological Cassettes* 2, no. 12 (1971).