

THE RHETORIC OF THE RESTORATION

MOVEMENT: 1800-1832

David Walker

In the early nineteenth century, a number of preachers were dissatisfied with the religious aspect of their environment; they were opposed to some teachings and practices of existing religious bodies for which they found no Scriptural authority. According to Garrison and DeGroot, two basic principles guided these men:

The first was that the church ought to be one, without sectarian divisions. The second was that the reasons for its divisions were the addition of "human opinions" to the simple requirements of Christ and his apostles as tests of fitness for admission to the church, and the usurpation of rule over the church by clergy and ecclesiastical courts unknown in the days of its primitive unity and purity.¹

These preachers attempted, at first, to reform existing religious bodies; as this effort progressed, however, the emphasis shifted from the idea of "reformation" to "restoration."² Alexander Campbell, writing in the Christian Baptist in 1825, is credited with being one of the first to emphasize the idea of restoring "the ancient order of things."³ The Restoration Movement spread rapidly until the 1850 census showed its adherents to be constituting the fourth largest church in the nation.⁴

In commenting on the significance of the Restoration Movement, William Warren Sweet states that the combined Disciples of Christ, Christian Church, and Churches of Christ

are now "generally recognized as . . . constituting the largest indigenous American church."⁵ This paper will confine itself to a telescoped view of a few aspects of the rhetoric of the movement during the first thirty-two years of the nineteenth century.

Historical Background

Several conditions present in America at this time had their impact on the Restoration movement. The nation was very young, with a small population. Furthermore, thought regarding Christianity was extremely divided; only a small portion of the population was affiliated with any church. A high degree of religious liberty was enjoyed by Christians.⁶ The democratic spirit beginning to envelope the country also had a significant influence on the progress of this movement. Although Calvinism remained the heart of most religions at the beginning of the century, it was losing ground in a nation stressing the individual importance of a person.⁷ Finally, lax moral conditions are described as being present at this time.⁸

The bulk of the activity of the Restoration Movement took place in the American frontier. This area began about fifty miles back from the seacoast where the young nation became less civilized and settled. Several basic characteristics typified the frontiersman. First, he was a strongly individualistic person.⁹ He was, however, one who enjoyed and craved companionship. A gathering to hear a traveling preacher really became more of a social activity than a religious one, in which the loneliness of the frontier was relieved.¹⁰

Secondly, he was highly responsive to emotional stimulus. As Niebuhr has discussed: "The isolation of frontier life fostered craving for companionship, suppressed the gregarious tendency and so subjected the lonely settler to the temptations of crowd suggestion to unusual degree."¹¹ Thirdly, the frontiersman was gullible. Removed in time and miles from more settled cultures, he was given to acceptance of primitive notions and superstitions which either had been learned from the Indians, or else had grown up among themselves.¹²

Fourthly, his thinking was basically and chiefly influenced by the Bible.¹³ However, the moral standards of the frontier often indicated that the ideas of the Bible had little impact upon his actions. Many places on the frontier became "notorious for lawlessness, rowdyism, Sabbath breaking, gambling, swearing, drinking, and fighting."¹⁴ Sweet contends that the rough character of a large portion of the frontier population and the rather general tendency of moral standards to break down on the frontier has long been accepted as historical fact.¹⁵

The Speakers

The spokespersons in the Restoration Movement conducted their activity in a number of different arenas. James O'Kelley, a Methodist, led a movement in the last decade of the eighteenth century against the authoritarian policies of Francis Asbury and established in North Carolina a "Christian Church."¹⁶

Abner Jones, a Baptist preacher in Vermont, organized a "Christian Church" in Lyndon, Vermont in 1801 after becoming greatly disturbed over sectarian names and creeds.¹⁷ Elias Smith, another Baptist, adopted similar beliefs in his preaching in Portsmouth, New Hampshire about the same time.¹⁸

About 1800, Tennessee and Kentucky were experiencing the Great Western Revival. This revival produced highly emotional responses from audiences; a favorite vehicle for this revival was the use of camp-meetings. These camp-meetings were opposed by some Presbyterians because (1) they allowed preachers without education or proper ordination to preach; (2) they produced disorderly and uncouth scenes as a result of the highly emotional responses; and (3) the evangelistic appeal was made that "Christ died for all," contrary to the Calvinistic teaching that only a limited number were the objects of redeeming grace. As a result of these charges, a trial was conducted by the Synod of Kentucky against some of the leaders; during the trial, a number of key leaders withdrew from the jurisdiction of that body. One of these men was Barton W. Stone, who became the strongest spokesman for the Restoration Movement in the eastern part of Kentucky.¹⁹ Leaders in this area of the movement decided to call themselves "Christian" with no sectarian name.²⁰

Other spokespersons included John Wright, his father, and his brother in Washington County, Indiana.²¹ The Scotch Baptists were another influential group in New York,

Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Pittsburg.²² Walter Scott was a highly successful evangelist.²³

Thomas and Alexander Campbell immigrated to this country in 1807 and 1809 respectively, from their native Ireland. Thomas Campbell gave to the Restoration Movement the slogan "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent."²⁴ Alexander, his son, is perhaps the best known figure of the movement. Successful as a speaker, debater, editor, and teacher, he influenced those who influenced others.

Other spokespersons in the early years of the movement included Jacob Creath, Jr., D.S. Burnet, Herman Christian Dasher, John T. Johnson, John Smith, Philip Slater Fall, and William Kincaide. The work of the movement was not just the work of a couple of individuals, but bore its stamp from many spokespersons.

Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Although there were a number of speakers, they seemed united for the most part on their beliefs. One of the most fundamental aspects of a Christian rhetoric has to be concerned with one's principles of Biblical interpretation. Basically, there were five key ideas.

1. The Bible is the word of God. There are several references to this principle, but for the most part, the Restoration speakers did not feel the need to develop this principle fully; the great majority of the audiences to

whom they spoke accepted it without question. A simple appeal to the Scriptures was considered to be final authority on all matters with which the Bible dealt.²⁵

2. Human creeds must be rejected: the Bible alone is sufficient.

Unlike the first principle, this attitude was not accepted by all the audiences. Attitudes toward human creeds constituted the reasons, in many instances, for various leaders withdrawing from churches. One of the earliest documents denouncing human creeds was the Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery, written in 1804. The authors of the document included Barton W. Stone. In abolishing themselves as a presbytery, they wrote:

We will, that our power of making laws for the government of the church, and executing them by delegated authority, forever cease; that the people may have free course to the Bible, and adopt the law of the spirit of life In Jesus Christ. . . .

We will, that the people henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven; and as many as are offended with other books, which stand in competition with it, may cast them in the fire if they choose; for it is better to enter into life having one book than having many to be cast into hell.²⁶

Creeds were described by various spokespersons as responsible for division among churches, homes, and closest friends.

3. The New Testament is the authority for beliefs and practices of the church. Restoration speakers saw Bible history as being divided into three dispensations called Patriarchal, Jewish, and Christian; the Old Testament

contained God's laws for the first two dispensations, and the New Testament revealed God's commands for the Christian dispensation. Although they recognized that the Old Testament was inspired and could be profitably studied, the Restoration speakers contended that its teachings were not binding upon the church; rather, the authority for the church rested in the teachings of the New Testament. Alexander Campbell, in his debate with W. L. MacCalla in 1823, compared the Patriarchal age to starlight, the Jewish to moonlight, and the Christian age to sunlight. The idea was that light increased with each dispensation.²⁷

4. Authority for beliefs and practices must be demonstrated by Express Command or Approved Example. The spokespersons argued that one must find within the New Testament either an express command or an approved example as authority for his religious beliefs and practices. Thomas Campbell argued that nothing could be enjoined upon the Christian Church "for which there cannot be expressly produced a 'Thus saith the Lord,' either in express terms, or by approved precedent."²⁸ Walter Scott, in attacking the position of someone who sustained an argument by "lawfully inferring" a conclusion, responded: "Lawfully inferred! pray, who is to decide when a thing is lawfully inferred."²⁹

5. Everyone has the right to interpret the Scriptures for himself. The fifth principle of Biblical interpretation is

a familiar Protestant one. Elias Smith wrote that "in all things essential to the faith and practice of a Christian, the Scriptures are plain and easy to be understood, by all who will diligently and impartially read and study them. . . . I do further assert, that every Christian is under an indispensable obligation to search the Scriptures for himself."³⁰

The leaders of the Restoration movement thus saw their ideas proceeding from five principles of Biblical interpretation. The Bible is the Word of God. Human creeds must be rejected; the Bible alone is sufficient. The New Testament is the authority for beliefs and practices of the church. Authority for beliefs and practices must be demonstrated by express command or approved example. Everyone has the right to interpret the Scriptures for himself.

The Role of the Speaker

As the Restoration movement progressed to "restore the ancient order," what, exactly, was the task of the Restorationist as he stood before his audience? They contended that the motivation for the minister was not the gaining of any personal popularity, but rather the acceptance of Christ, on the part of the audience, as Savior from sin. A second goal on the part of the speaker was to correct erroneous religious doctrines which the Restoration leaders believed to be taught by many existing churches. As

they sought these goals, these speakers had the obligation, they believed, of demonstrating themselves to be worthy of their mission by living upright lives, both in and out of the pulpit.

Writing in 1829, Alexander Campbell charged that:

Some men speak merely for the sake of speaking. It is their object to speak. Others speak for the sake of some point to be gained. Their object is to gain that point. . . . But he who speaks for some great, or good, or interesting object, loses himself in the subject; forgets almost his own identity, and sees or feels nothing but that for which he speaks. . . . The great end and object of all who teach or preach Jesus to men, should be to gain the hearts of men to him. Not to gain popularity for themselves, but to woo men to Christ.³¹

In a biting, satirical article published several years earlier, Campbell had denounced the type of speaker who spoke for the sake of personal advantage. His article, "The Third Epistle of Peter," attacked what he considered to be the standards followed by some rulers of congregations and their preachers:

When you go to the church to preach, go not by the retired way where go those that would shun the crowd, but go into the highway where go the multitude, see that ye have on the robes of black, and take heed that your pace be measured well, and that your march be stately.

Then shall your "hearers be lifted up," even as the hearts of mighty men shall they be lifted up. And ye shall be gazed upon by the multitude, and they shall honor you; and the men shall praise you, and the women shall glorify you, even by women shall ye be glorified.

Campbell denounced the minister who preached for the purpose of making money.

"In all your gettings" get money! Now, therefore, when you go forth on your ministerial journey, go where there are silver and gold, and where each man will pay according to his measure. For verily I say ye must get your reward.³²

Included in the task of preaching to mankind was a second goal. The speaker must, Campbell contended, advocate reformation of existing religious conditions and bodies:

Were Paul on earth now, he would proclaim reformation. He would from the acknowledgments, and from the behavior of our contemporaries, denounce the judgments of God upon them if they reformed not. He would show them that sects, opinions, speculations, and doctrines, were not the religion of Jesus Christ; and if they reformed not, into the kingdom of glory they could not enter.³³

Barton W. Stone echoed similar thoughts in his Christian Messenger. The man who "points the proper way of reformation must certainly be engaged in a work pleasing to God, and profitable to man," he declared.³⁴ Stone believed that the minister must be motivated by his love for mankind. Writing to a young minister, he contended that the minister should avoid preaching as much as possible on controversial subjects. Furthermore, he should show his love for mankind by not wounding the feelings of anyone. He finally concluded that the minister's love for man must be so great, that he must be willing to give up everything, if necessary, in order to fulfill his goal as a Christian preacher.³⁵

D. S. Burnet, writing in his *Evangelical Inquirer*, commented:

Every orator should have something to say. . . . He that makes no communications, has no claim upon public attention. I should neither write nor speak, if I had not something of importance to present to the eye and ear, and through these media to interest the mind.³⁶

The Restoration spokespersons envisioned a demanding life for the minister--one that required him to demonstrate in his life the objectives of his ministry. He had the obligation to live a life of example to others, both in and out of the pulpit. Stone declared that preachers must first "experience the force of that truth we deliver to others."³⁷ Stone, in writing his "Letter to J.C.," concluded:

Be careful that you live and walk in the spirit every day. Your addresses will then be spiritual and profitable to your hearers. A dead, worldly and spiritless ministry, is a curse to the world. Such a ministry is a ministry of death.³⁸

Alexander Campbell also demanded high standards for his minister. He adopted, early in his life, some rules which guided his life as a preacher. Among these rules were:

1. The preacher must be a man of piety, and one who has the instruction and salvation of mankind sincerely at heart.
2. A man of modest and simple manners, and in his public performance and general behavior must conduct himself so as to make his people sensible that he has their temporal and eternal welfare more at heart than anything else.³⁹

As a minister attempted to reflect the objectives of his ministry, he had to demonstrate the virtue of humility. Elias Smith attacked the "titles and dresses of our fashionable

clergy," saying that they made him "ashamed of them as they pass along the streets on the first day of the week. The Reverend Dr.'s -- or Rabbis, with their long robes, and greetings which they love."⁴⁰ Alexander Campbell, in his "Third Epistle of Peter," already mentioned in this paper, satirized the lack of humility present in many ministers by attacking the style and manner of living to which many had become accustomed.

And let your dwelling places be houses of splendor and edifices of cost; and let your doors be decked with plates of brass, and let your names, even your reverend titles be graven thereon; so shall it be as a sign. . . .

Let the houses in which you preach be called churches, and let them be built in manner of great ornament without, and adorned with much cost within; with rich pillars and paints, and with fine altars and pedestals, and urns of precious stones, and clothes of velvet and scarlet, and vessels of silver.⁴¹

The demand for high ethics in the preacher's life also carried over in certain aspects of the preaching style. Articles attacked the plagiarist of other's sermons, the person who pretended to be speaking without notes when actually he was using them, and the person who spoke in an affected manner of delivery.⁴²

Standing before his audience without clerical titles or garments, but rather as a humble student of the Bible, the Restoration spokesperson attempted to persuade his audience to accept salvation--he was not seeking the praise of the audience. He further tried to demonstrate, in his daily life, the message he was preaching from the pulpit.

This paper has looked briefly at two aspects of the rhetoric of the period of the Restoration Movement. Other aspects of that rhetoric which are vital to an understanding of that movement include their methods of speech preparation, their basic stock of ideas and logical development, and their motivational techniques.⁴³ A study of rhetorical movements should contribute to our understanding of rhetorical theory. These various spokespersons, reacting against religious conditions with which they were dissatisfied, practiced a viable rhetoric that exerted a powerful influence upon the American frontier.

FOOTNOTES

¹Windred Ernest Garrison and Alfred T. DeGroot, The Disciples of Christ: A History, (St. Louis, 1964), p. 11.

²Earl Irwin West, The Search for the Ancient Order, (Nashville, 1964), I, 70-71.

³"A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things, No. I," Christian Baptist, II, (February 1825). 132-136.

⁴West, p. XI.

⁵"Campbell Position in Church History," Christian Evangelist, LXXVI, (September 1938), 970.

⁶Garrison and DeGroot, pp. 59-60. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Age of Alexander Campbell," The Sage of Bethany, comp. Perry E. Gresham, (St. Louis, 1960), pp. 29; 59-60.

⁷Schlesinger, pp. 25-27.

⁸Winfred Ernest Garrison, Religion Follows the Frontier, (New York, 1931), p. xi.

⁹Rodney L. McQuary, "Social Background of the Disciples of Christ," College of the Bible Quarterly, XIII, (March 1924), 7.

¹⁰Frederic L. Paxson, History of the American Frontier 1763-1893, (Boston, 1924), p. 114. Oliver Read Whitley, Trumpet Call of Reformation, (St. Louis, 1959), p. 36.

¹¹H. Richard Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism, (Cleveland, 1957), pp. 142-143.

¹²Merrill E. Gaddis, "Religious Ideas and Attitudes on the Early Frontier," Church History, II, (September, 1933), pp. 156-157.

¹³Bower Aly and Grafton P. Tanquary, "The Early National Period: 1788-1860," History and Criticism of American Public Address, ed. William Norwood Brigance, (New York, 1943), I, 60.

¹⁴Ross Stafford North, "The Evangelism of Walter Scott," (M.A. Thesis, L.S.U., 1952), p. 9.

¹⁵William Warren Sweet, Religion on the American Frontier (New York, 1964), IV, 640.

¹⁶West, p. 10. ¹⁷Garrison and DeGroot, p. 89.

¹⁸Walter Wilson Jennings, Origin and Early History of the Disciples of Christ, (Cincinnati, 1919), p. 65. Garrison and DeGroot, p. 88.

¹⁹Garrison and DeGroot, pp. 98-104.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 111-114.

²¹James DeForest Murch, Christians Only, (Cincinnati, 1962), p. 91.

²²Harold W. Ford, A History of the Restoration Plea, (Oklahoma City, 1952), p. 10.

²³Millennial Harbinger, II, (October, 1831), 480.
North, pp. iv, v, 3.

²⁴West, pp. 44-49.

²⁵Paul Southern, "Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Restoration Movement," Restoration Quarterly, I, (Winter, 1957), 9-11.

²⁶F. L. Rowe (comp.), Pioneer Sermons and Addresses, (Cincinnati: F. L. Rowe, 1925), pp. 8-12.

²⁷Alexander Campbell and W. L. MacCalla, Debate on Christian Baptism, (London: Simplin and Marshall, 1842), p. 107.

²⁸Rowe, p. 18.

²⁹"Sacred Colloquy," Evangelist, I, (July, 1832).
p. 147.

³⁰The Life of Elias Smith, (Boston, 1840), pp. 352-353.

- 31 "Sermons to Young Preachers, No. II," Christian Baptist, VII, (December, 1829), pp. 105-106.
- 32 "The Third Epistle of Peter to the Preachers and Rulers of Congfegations," Christian Baptist, II, (July, 1825), pp. 245-246.
- 33 "Sermons to Young Preachers, No. IV," Christian Baptist, VII, (April, 1830), pp. 215-216.
- 34 Christian Messenger, I, (December, 1826), 1.
- 35 "Letters to J.C.," Christian Messenger, IV, (September, 1830), p. 225. Christian Messenger, I, (December, 1826), pp. 3-4.
- 36 "A Thorough Hearing," Evangelical Inquirer, I, (June, 1830), pp. 13-14.
- 37 Evan Ulrey, "The Preaching of Barton Warren Stone," (Ph.D. Thesis, L.S.U., 1955), p. 185.
- 38 "Letter to J.C.," pp. 225-226.
- 39 Thomas W. Grafton, Alexander Campbell, (St. Louis, 1897), p. 64.
- 40 "The Pulpit," Morning Star and City Watchman, I, (August, 1827), p. 55.
- 41 "The Third Epistle of Peter," p. 224.
- 42 Millennial Harbinger, I, (February, 1830), pp. 95-96. "Pulpit Honesty," Christian Baptist, I, (May, 1824), pp. 201-202, "The Pulpit."
- 43 See David Ellis Walker, Jr., The Rhetoric of the Restoration Movement: The Period of Inception: 1800-1832, (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Florida, 1969).