

Missionary Society

By J D Logan

This was one of the first digressions to appear among the churches of Christ. It represented a major departure from the scriptural pattern, outlining the role of the church in spreading the Gospel.

The Historical Facts

The American Christian Missionary Society had its roots in what we refer to as the “Restoration Movement”. In the early 1800s the religious ferment referred to as “the great awakening” began in the western sections of the United States and quickly spread into other parts of the country. Men began to insist that believers in Christ should abandon all denominational doctrines, names, and patterns of worship, and called for a “thus saith the word” in all doctrine, faith and practice in worship.

There arose several men who became prominent preachers and teachers of God's word, among whom John “Raccoon” Smith, Barton Stone, Thomas and Alexander Campbell, as well as others. Gradually those who followed these principles formed congregations separate from their denominational neighbors and began to put these principles into practice. They referred to themselves as “Christian Churches” and “Disciples of Christ”. These congregations grew at a rapid pace and the membership grew at an unprecedented rate.

As the church grew, some preachers and leaders felt that the church needed help in carrying out the “great commission”. They became dissatisfied with the scriptural organization of the church in its simplicity and began to organize various non-scriptural organizations and societies to do this essential work.

On October 23, 1849, in Cincinnati, Ohio, there was a convention held by a segment of the church for the express purpose of furthering the work by the church collectively. During this meeting, the “American Christian Missionary Society” was organized. Prominent in this convention was W. K. Pendleton, son-in-law of Alexander Campbell.

In the words of William J. Wright of Cincinnati, Ohio, (1910 Centennial Convention report) “our movement had no missionary organization”. “...the conquest of America and the lands beyond was an impossibility unless the mobs or bands were hammered into an army.” He was referring to the preachers and workers of the “restoration movement”, (Smith, Campbell, Stone, etc) plus a multitude of great workers who furthered this work of restoring early Christianity in its purity.

Arguments in Defense of the “Society”

1. That this restorative effort had, and was, succeeding was clearly seen in that the movement was the fastest growing religious movement in the world. Why was it necessary to add into this clearly successful effort a element separate and apart from the church? That it was apparent to the instigators that it was to be a separate organization from the church is clearly shown by the following from the Centennial Report on the 100th anniversary of the Missionary Society. “It became necessary to show how far human accessories to the working of the church were advisable or permissible if the faith, worship and service were to be kept pure. How could we restore the church of the first century, and yet make use of agencies and methods not described in the New Testament?”

A further admission by the supporters of the Society that it was entirely foreign to the New Testament teachings is the following: “Conservative and literalist called the society an innovation and an abomination. The Fathers decided that to restore in Toto the apostolic church was neither wise nor Christian.”

Astounding!! This needs no answer on my part!!

2. Another contention of the founders of this “society” was...”To hold the same opinions, to be of the same craft or profession, to share the same beliefs, or even hold common religious faith does not constitute a brotherhood...” It was necessary, in their words, to create a non-scriptural man-made organization in order to bring about true brotherhood. What incredible effrontery to suggest that the apostles of our Lord and the congregations they established were unable to fulfill the mission assigned to them by the Lord necessitating a man-made “society”.

Answer

In Paul's words, “*Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.*” (1 Cor. 1:10). This was God's plan to achieve brotherhood”!!

It seems that those who hold to this “society” find themselves at odds with God's plan!!

What is it that constitutes a “brotherhood”? Hear Paul again. “*To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse...*” (Col. 1:2). “*Salute the brethren which are at Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house.*” (Col. 4:15) Apparently, Paul believed that the church constituted a “brotherhood”. According to some, for 1849 years, the church of Christ had failed to accomplish the work given by God, according to the form instituted by the apostles (the local congregation with its elders), making it necessary for men to form a “society” to do this work.

In this scheme of things, congregations were to channel their resources into an outside organization, which would in turn do the work assigned to each local congregation and its elders. This was early-on made into a test of fellowship and a division was made in the church.

3. Mr Pendleton argued that the church's responsibility was to preach the Gospel to the whole world; but did not specify the method of doing this. He reasoned that any method the church chooses to do this work is acceptable.

Mr. Pendleton further reasoned that since there is no expressed objection (in the scriptures) to the society, it is not an unscriptural method.

Answer

This is the sort of reasoning that is used to justify all additions to the work and worship of the church. If anything is acceptable merely because it is not expressly forbidden in the scriptures, there is no limit to the innovations that we may introduce. Choirs, orchestras, actors (I know of some of these), infant baptism, instrumental music (This was adopted by the same people shortly afterward) burning incense, candles, “holy water”...the list is endless. In the end, what is called “church of Christ” would bear no resemblances to that church we read about in the New Testament.

In short, this would not be a restored church, in any sense, but merely another denomination among many others!!

Ben Franklin, in the American Christian Review, on May 7, 1867, wrote, “The circumstance that they had no missionary societies in the first age of the church, of itself, does not prove that we may not have them. But the fact that the Lord ordained the congregations, with their officers, and made it their work to convert the world with the additional fact that we have their example in sending out preachers, with the circumstance, that they had no missionary societies, but the churches, proves that it is wrong for individuals to create missionary societies, separate from local churches, as substitutes to do the work which the Lord appointed for the churches....The simple question is, whether we shall honor the churches in working in them and making them effective as the Lord's appointed societies, in converting the world, or declare them insufficient to do the work which the Lord committed to them, and substitute a creation of our own hands, to do the work of the churches ordained by the Lord.”

David Lipscomb wrote in the Gospel Advocate, Feb 7, 1867, “To operate through an institution of man's devising in preference to the church of God is, in our esteem, to exalt man as of superior wisdom and power to God.”

Jacob Creath wrote in the Gospel Advocate, Jan 6, 1866, “...Ancient Christianity was spread by individuals, and not by societies or proxies, as is the modern gospels....The Jerusalem Church spread the gospel, or her members did individually, after the resurrection of Christ, before another church existed to assist her through Judea, Samaria, Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch...in the first century of the Christian era (Acts 1, 2 and 11) As this mother and model church spread the gospel, so did the other churches individually (not from societies), such as Antioch in Syria (Acts 13), and Thessalonica sounded out the gospel in Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thess. 1:8). Let any church now do the same as these ancient churches did; let each member do all he can to spread the gospel. If a church or person is not able to do anything to spread the gospel, nothing is required of that person...”

We should take the records of the first-century churches to heart, as well as these diligent nineteenth century workers, as our examples and shun all “societies” as unworthy.

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