

# Learning A Lesson From History

by Earl Irvin West

In October, 1849, the American Christian Missionary Society was established in the city of Cincinnati. Alexander Campbell, through the pages of the **Millennial Harbinger**, had, for more than a decade, been laying the groundwork for this organization. He was not present for the 1849 meeting for the reason he suggested, of sickness. Nevertheless, in his absence he was elected president, which position he held until his death in 1866. The last time Campbell was ever present for a convention meeting was in 1862. In his last years, he was too feeble to play any part in the general work of the society.

From its beginning, the missionary society never has been widely accepted among the brethren. There can be no question but that in the first decade after its origin, the society was not widely acclaimed. This fact is sustained not merely by the objections raised to it by its opponents, but more effectively by the fact that the churches simply refused to support the society. The Churches of Christ, in the passing of years, rejected the society. The so-called "Christian Churches," who have had some devotion to it, have found it to be a boiling cauldron; its existence has been stormy, to say the least.

Twice in the history of society, special efforts had to be made to save it from complete disintegration. During the Civil War, it was made up entirely of Northern sympathizers. On two or three different occasions, it passed resolutions of a political nature which sympathized with the North. Consequently, when the war ended in 1865, it was at a very low ebb of popularity in the church. Its strongest supporters called upon W. K. Pendleton, son-in-law of Alexander Campbell, to deliver a speech in its defense before the convention. Pendleton saved the society with that speech.

Again in the year 1874, the society was ready to collapse. The Louisville Plan, which had been enacted in 1869, was thought to be the best scheme for uniting the brotherhood behind it; but this plan failed to unite many churches. For a period of a few months, it did appease Ben Franklin, editor of the **American Christian Review**. By 1874, however, something had to be done, and W. K. Pendleton was again called upon to deliver another speech to revitalize the society effort. If Alexander Campbell can be looked upon as the founder of the society, W. K. Pendleton can be regarded as its savior.

In W. K. Pendleton's speech of 1866, the student of restoration history finds the real gist of all society arguments. Many arguments before that day and since have been presented whereby the society was defended. But, in reality, all of them draw their light from Pendleton's speech. Pendleton said, in sum substance, everything in the society's defense that had been said before or has been said since. Some have elucidated more on some parts of his speech, but, as far as the substance is concerned, there is little new to be found. It will be of interest here to notice some of the chief features of Pendleton's defense before going to the core of his major arguments. First of all, it was suggested by the opponents of the society that "we are, departing from original ground." Society advocates were told that the society was unknown to the earlier restoration

movement, and that Alexander Campbell had written against it in the **Christian Baptist**. Pendleton's answer to this assertion was simply a charge that the opponents of the society were following human opinion. Suppose the early pioneers did have an opinion that it was wrong to support a society; that should not be binding upon them. This was contrary to the very genius of the restoration movement. This, in sum substance, was what Pendleton said concerning the charge that the brethren were departing from the original ground.

The second line of argument ran, "Your missionary society is not scriptural." The society's opponents argued that there was no such precept in the scriptures which commanded it. But Pendleton answered, "You say, 'Your Missionary Society is not scriptural'-and you mean by this, that there is no special express precept in the Scriptures commanding it. We concede this without a moment's hesitation. There is none; but what do you make of it? Is everything which is not scriptural, therefore wrong?"

Thus Pendleton admitted that the scripture was silent about the society, but this, itself, was not argument against its existence. Speaking about the opponent of the society, Pendleton proceeded to say, "Does he say that it is not positively and expressly commanded? Then we demand by what canon of interpretation does he make mere silence prohibitory? You reply, the canon which forbids anything as a rule of Christian faith or duty, for which there cannot be expressly produced a 'Thus saith the Lord,' 'either in express terms or by approved precedent' " Here, of course, Pendleton had to elaborate a little more. Thomas Campbell had said, "Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent." It can be safely said that the majority of the brotherhood had interpreted that motto to mean that whatever is unauthorized is forbidden; but Pendleton argued this interpretation down. He positively affirmed that Thomas Campbell never meant any such idea. He cited the fact that Campbell, in establishing the Christian Association of Washington, surely had sense enough to know that such an association was not found in the scripture. Pendleton also affirmed that this association was a human organization with an executive board, secretary, and treasurer. Then he said, "Now it was this organization, which in the very act of forming itself, announced the canon! Did they mean to condemn themselves? Were they simpletons or hypocrites?"

This argument was very telling at that time. Robert Richardson had not yet written his "Memoirs of Alexander Campbell," but, later on, when reviewing that early period, Richardson well explains that Thomas Campbell himself did not have a full conception of everything involved in the premises which he uttered. For example, Campbell still believed in infant baptism when he made the announcement of that premise. Actually, Campbell was neither a simpleton nor a hypocrite; as Richardson later explained, he merely knew that something needed to be done. The premise seemed like a safe one, and he uttered it without having thought it through thoroughly.

But in so stating this new interpretation of Thomas Campbell's old motto, Pendleton was laying the groundwork for a new conception in the restoration movement. It was this conception concerning the silence of the scripture that Isaac Errett adopted, and that became a vital principle in the editorial policy of the Christian Standard and, of course, is still tenaciously held by the Christian church today. W. K. Pendleton was the father of this interpretation of Campbell's

motto. To Pendleton it was a tragedy for the church to remain silent where the scripture was silent. He said, "Let it not be said, then, that the disciples of Christ are to take the silence of Scripture on a given subject as a positive rule of prohibition against all freedom of action or obligation of duty. No rule could be more productive of evil than this."

In our next article, we shall proceed from this point to see how Pendleton defended the society on the ground of expediency.

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