

Learning A Lesson From History (No. 2)

by Earl Irvin West

W. K. Pendleton had asserted that merely because the Scripture was silent on the missionary society did not argue against the society. If we were to follow the principle of the silence of the Scripture on any given subject as a positive rule of prohibition, Pendleton believed that this rule would be productive of evil. But up to now, he had merely argued against the criticisms of the society's opponents. The greater part of his speech was devoted to the proper defence of the missionary society on the ground of expediency. We give in summary the argument which Pendleton used. Those who will be interested in reading his address may find it in the November issue of the Millennial Harbinger for the year 1866, beginning on page 494.

The word church is used in the Bible in two different senses: a local and a universal sense. The church at Corinth, for example, was the use of the term in a local sense. It had reference to the saints in a particular locality. The word church used in a universal sense had reference to all of the saints the world over.

Alexander Campbell had argued that God had given to the church the responsibility of saving souls, but to what church -the church in the local sense or the universal church? His answer: the church universal had been given the obligation of preaching the gospel to save souls. Whatever method the church, in the universal sense of the term, would use to preach the gospel to save the souls was acceptable on the grounds of expediency. In other words, God commanded the church to preach the gospel, but he did not tell the church the ways and means of preaching the gospel; therefore, it was left free to devise any kind of scheme in order to accomplish this work. This is the core of the defense that both Alexander Campbell and W. K. Pendleton used. This was the crux of the defense by the advocates of the society from that day to this. Stated briefly, the defense is, "The church universal must preach the gospel, but God has left the church universal free to devise whatever schemes it can to accomplish its work."

With Alexander Campbell, W. K. Pendleton and Issac Errett, and all the hosts of society advocates, any human organization which the church wanted to bring about to accomplish the work of the church was thoroughly acceptable as an expediency. If the church were interested in establishing a Bible society, it could do so on the same ground of expediency. If the church were interested in establishing a publication society, it could do so on the same ground. Moreover, if the church were interested in establishing educational institutions, it could do so on the ground of expediency. The church universal had a work to do. Whatever organizations it felt called upon to establish, as a church, were perfectly acceptable and defensible on the ground of expediency. When, therefore, Alexander Campbell or W. K. Pendleton called upon the churches of a particular state to endow a chair for Bethany College, they did so with perfect consistency. To them human organizations to aid the church were right. It was perfectly acceptable, in their opinion, for a human organization to exist in order to do the work of the church. It is rather strange how some men in the present day can feel that they act consistently when they do not occupy the same ground which Campbell did. Campbell believed it was all right for a society of any nature to do the church's work; therefore it was not wrong for the church to support that

society, and Campbell freely asked for it. Brethren today, however, claim to believe that it is wrong for a human organization to exist to do the work of the church. Just how they can be consistent is hard to see when they do not occupy the same position with respect to human organizations that Campbell did. He and Pendleton believed that it was right for the church to use any human organization to do its work. Thus, they could ask for any church support for that human organization and do so consistently with their own viewpoints. It is generally admitted today that no human organization has any right to exist to do the work which God gave the church. He who believes this cannot consistently believe that the church should support any human organization.

The Church Universal

Someday, somebody will do the cause of Christ a real service by taking the concept of the church universal and giving it a thorough analysis based upon the scriptures and upon church history for the past two thousand years. The church is spoken of in the New Testament in a universal sense. There is a body of people, characterized by the fact that they follow Jesus, that comprise the New Testament church in its universal sense. However, there are some things about this truly significant. For example, it is significant that the church universal has never known but one officer-Jesus Christ himself, who is head over the body, King over his kingdom. The apostles were ambassadors of this King to the church universal. They were not officers of the church, were never appointed by the church, and existed before the church did.

The study of church history reveals the fact that every time men thought in terms of the church universal, they ended up by forming organizations which, in their work, substituted themselves in the place of Christ. Roman Catholicism is the highest embodiment of the church universal concept and is frank to admit that its pope is considered the vicegerent of Christ on earth. So far as the church universal on earth is concerned, as viewed by a Romanist, the pope is Christ. Protestantism thought in terms of the church universal and set up synods and conferences. These synods and conferences have written creeds, created confessions of faith-in short, have made laws for the church universal, a prerogative which belongs to Christ. In the final analysis, these synods and conferences assume the position of Christ over the church universal.

Some, like the Baptist denomination, have tried to throw off the concept of the church universal for a time and insist upon strict congregational policy. Yet, they invariably thought in terms of the church universal and established associations which soon began to dictate to the local churches, a prerogative which again belongs to Christ. In the restoration movement, brethren began to think in terms of the church universal and, with that concept, formed a missionary society. Looking back on this history, as we can now, who can fail to see that this society became the master and soon dictated to the churches, a prerogative which belongs only to Christ.

That Christ intended for the world to be converted through individual congregations being established in every local community and, thence, exercising a saving influence over that community seems too obvious for dispute. The plan which the author of Acts lays down is that the gospel is to spread from Jerusalem, thence to Judea, to Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of

the earth. The gospel radiated out, local congregations were planted, and exercised a saving influence upon the community. In one generation the gospel was sounded out to the whole earth, and that without a missionary satiety. It is an indictment not against the organization but against our individual religious fervor that the same isn't done today. The only church organization known to the New Testament is that of a local church, not the church universal. The individual congregation of Christ's disciples is the only missionary society known to the scriptures.

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