

Learning A Lesson From History (No. 3)

by Earl Irvin West

There can be no doubt that W. K. Pendleton did not press his argument concerning the church universal to its logical conclusion. David Lipscomb was quick to realize that fact. He saw at once the dangerous extreme to which that argument could be taken, and so he replied, "The only defense that can be made of these institutions is, that there must be a universal organization of the church of God with an earthly central head, that overlooks and directs the operations of all the numerous local organizations or congregations. The premises that lead to this conclusion were laid down not very definitely by Brother Pendleton, in his last address at the last meeting of the Cincinnati society. The logical result of these premises, we gladly note, he shrinks back from declaring. This, to our mind, is the most objectionable ground the societies could be placed upon. Brother Pendleton's use of the terms, universal church, in connection with the society organization, we think can have no other meaning" (*Gospel Advocate*, 1867, pg. 115).

Lipscomb was right in sensing the fact that Pendleton's assertion would lead to the organization of a universal controlling point over the church in order to guide and direct its operations. This has substantially been done in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as many less effective ways in the various Protestant denominations. The principle, as applied to the colleges, has already been suggested. The idea held by Pendleton asserted that the church universal had a right to form any kind of human organization in order to accomplish the work which God gave it to do. The formation of such an organization would likely be defended upon the ground of expediency. Whether this organization would be a missionary or Bible Society, publication society, educational society or college, mattered little. The church had a right to use any of these human organizations to do its work, according to Pendleton.

This ground had been thoroughly contested by opponents of the society by the time our brethren became sufficiently interested to establish schools. Between the years 1871 and 1878, the College of the Bible at Kentucky University had caused considerable anxiety. David Lipscomb had much to say against it and spoke derisively of Bible colleges. Ben Franklin, acting rather hastily, immediately put the college into the same category with the missionary society, and spent the remaining few years of his life opposing colleges. Even Jacob Creath, Jr., did the same thing. These men viewed the schools from the old standpoint that brethren had always taken—on the same plane of expediency as the missionary society.

"Lipscomb's Viewpoint"

When David Lipscomb established the Nashville Bible School in 1891, he did not view the college from the same standpoint which others had seen it, which was that no human organization - missionary society, Bible society, or college, etc-had any right to exist in order to do the work which God gave the church to do. The maxim was thoroughly settled in his mind, as well as in the minds of others. But there was a phase which brethren had always overlooked. The matter of teaching the Bible is not only the obligation of the church, acting as a whole, but it is

also the obligation of individual Christians. If a person is a banker and he is also a Christian, it is his obligation to teach the Bible in his bank to all whom he has an opportunity to reach. If a farmer is a Christian, it is his obligation to teach the Bible to all whom he has an opportunity to reach. If a school teacher is a Christian, it is his obligation, as a Christian, to teach all men the Bible. Indeed, he could not be a Christian and fail to do this. Nor would this man think that his particular occupation was in any way connected with the church or that it was doing the work of the church. When the Christian who is a banker teaches the Bible in his bank to others who may be reached there, he is not doing the work of the church; he is doing the work of a Christian. When the Christian who is a farmer teaches the Bible on his farm to those whom he may reach, the farmer is not doing the work of the church; the man is simply doing his own work as a Christian. When the Christian who is a school teacher teaches the Bible to those whom he has an opportunity to reach, the school is not doing the work of the church; the Christian is just doing the work which God gave him to do. He has the same Bible authority to do this that Paul had to preach the gospel while he was working as a tent maker. He is acting as an individual Christian in doing what he can to spread the cause of Christ.

It was this point of view which both James A. Handing and David Lipscomb used in looking at the school situation. Their conception of the school was not that it was an organization doing the work of the church but simply was an opportunity for Christian men, who were teachers, to act as Christian men in teaching the word of God. The school was placed upon the same plane, to use one of David Lipscomb's illustrations, as a Christian who was a banker or a farmer. What, therefore, is the relation of the school to the church? It has the same-relation that any other business has where the individual teaches the Bible in connection with the business. He is not doing the work of the church; rather he is doing the work which he, as a Christian, is to do.

The Two Points of View

It can be clearly seen that there were two points of view with respect to the school which entered into the thinking of the brethren. Coming on down from Alexander Campbell and W. K. Pendleton was the idea that the church universal had work to do and that it could employ any organization it so desired in order to do this work, defending it on the ground of expediency. The college, as a human organization, would occupy the role of doing the work of the church. From this point of view, the society and college stood exactly on the same basis. At the close of the Civil War, many of the brethren had this viewpoint. Consequently, when Ben Franklin and the American Christian Review turned against the missionary society, they felt it compulsory, in order to be consistent, to turn against the school as well, for they considered it a human organization also. That idea has come down through the American Christian Review even to modern days and it is still a common objection that the school and the society exist on the same plane; so if the society is unscriptural, the school is unscriptural, too.

On the other hand, Lipscomb and Handing did not consider the Nashville Bible School to be on the same plane with the missionary society. The Bible School was not doing the work of the church; the individuals who taught in it were doing the work that they, as Christians, should do.

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