

**OUR RESTORATION MOVEMENT:
HERITAGE AND DESTINY -- RE-EXAMINED**

by

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1993 is the Centennial of an important event in history of our nation. I refer to the great Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1883. At the close of the last century Chicago was the most dynamic city in America. The inland terminal of the vast Great Lakes Water System and the hub for the transcontinental railroads that were built after the Civil War, Chicago was the gateway to the West. It also was the site selected by John D. Rockefeller for a great University that was to become the Athens of America and thus exert a powerful influence on the westward development of the nation. In 1891 he bestowed on a tiny Baptist college a huge endowment converting it into the University of Chicago.

The first of the world's fairs had been staged in Philadelphia in 1876 to commemorate the centennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. 1892 was the Quattro-centennial of the discovery of America and a giant celebration, intended to eclipse the Philadelphia affair, was planned for Chicago. Its massive scale delayed its opening for a year. America's leading architects were engaged to lay out the chosen site adjacent to the new university and to design the major axes, lagoons, neo-classical buildings, and great plazas. The influence of this Columbian Exposition on urban American architecture was widespread and lasting. Beyond the many architectural splendors, incredible sights greeted the visitors. The focus of the

Exposition centered on technological progress. Scarcely a decade had passed since Edison's invention of the incandescent light bulb and thousands viewed an electric light for the first time. And they saw steam power applied to the many backbreaking tasks of farming, like grain-threshing. And the mysterious new force known as electricity gave even greater promise to the future. There were engines that required no coal to fuel their movement; only a wire was needed to carry this little known or understood power. Who could say what the mind of man would think of next? The future seemed to hold no limit.

The great exposition became the focus of many kinds of meetings as throngs of people headed for Chicago. One such meeting was a gathering of historians from many distant places. At this meeting a youthful historian, recently graduated from the doctoral program at Johns Hopkins University and at that time teaching American History at the University of Wisconsin, was invited to deliver an address, which turned out to be somewhat of a bombshell. The professor was a native of Wisconsin named Frederick Jackson Turner. The title of his speech was "The Significance of the Frontier in American History". It dared to call into question some of the basic presuppositions of current American historiography. Previously, American historians had seen American democracy arising out of European thinking as it was mediated by the revered "fathers of the country" (Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe and others of this type.) Turner questioned this claim, affirming instead that American democracy is a product of life on the frontier. He held that it was "Not the constitution, but free land

and an abundance of natural resources open to a fit people, [that] made the democratic society in America."¹ It was the combination of abundant free land, plentiful resources, ever-present danger, and the challenge of hard work amid harsh circumstances that bred a new type of person and a new kind of freedom. In the speech, and in subsequent publications, Turner defined those characteristics which developed in the frontiersman and which subsequently came to be incorporated into the American psyche. He saw that conditions on the frontier demanded people who were courageous and optimistic, ready to confront a dangerous and harsh wilderness because they were confident that they were creating a better tomorrow for themselves and their families. They came to the frontier under no illusion of comfort or ease, but they were willing to endure the formidable hardship of frontier life because of their unshakable conviction that the future would bring a better kind of life for themselves and their families. This conviction gave birth to a fiercely independent spirit in the character of the pioneer. This independent pioneer asked no quarter from anybody and expected no favors or privileges. He was his own man and did his own thinking. Consequently, the frontier bred a spirit of individualism that still manifests itself in some areas of American life.

Turner noted that the frontiersman lacked much in the way of formal education, and that he was generally given to simplistic solutions for the problems he encountered. Not interested in theories, he went for answers that were direct and effective. He was intensely practical, innovative, and ingenious. In the

isolation of the frontier he was forced to solve his own problems and to make do with what was at hand. We are still impressed with the skills to be seen in pioneer artifacts. The pioneer met his own needs and demonstrated remarkable self-sufficiency, a quality that generations later may yet be found in this nation of "do it yourself"ers. I am reminded that during World War II European soldiers were amazed at American G I's who could fix equipment that European soldiers abandoned provided only that they had a pair of pliers and a piece of wire. Americans ingenuity still impresses people in other parts of the world.

The courage, optimism, and self-reliance of the frontiersman made him indifferent if not contemptuous of what he considered to be artificial distinctions in society. He cared little or nothing for blue-blooded ancestry. It mattered little to him who one's progenitors were; he was interested in each person for what he or she was. As Turner says, "He had a passionate hatred for aristocracy, monopoly, and special privilege; he believed in simplicity, economy, and the rule of people".² In other words, he was fiercely egalitarian. He understood the phrase in the Declaration of Independence "all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights" in a literal and quite different sense from the way it was understood in the settled communities of the more European eastern seaboard.

Not only was he unimpressed with artificial social distinctions, he was often quite crude, socially. Of course, the one room log cabin often with only a dirt floor and the most

primitive furnishings, was a difficult place in which to maintain delicate, sophisticated manners. Stories abound about the ways that old pioneers often shocked their grandchildren by their actions and speech in later times when "good manners" became more important. Probably the most hilarious example of this was seen on March 4, 1829, when Andrew Jackson was inaugurated President and the frontiersmen descended on Washington and made a shambles of the White House, forcing a hardly sober President Jackson to escape out of an upper story window. One can imagine the horror experienced by the urbane, aristocratic John Quincy Adams who had vacated the mansion only a few days earlier, when he learned how muddy and manured boots had destroyed the fine tapestries of the White House in the fracas of Inauguration Day. It is difficult to imagine a more dramatic example of the contrast and conflict between the eastern culture and the culture of the West than is seen in the Adams-Jackson transition. Although he does not say it in so many words, the inference in Turner is that the upper-crust life-style in the Atlantic states was seen as a poor imitation of European aristocracy. The "fathers of the country" were mostly large plantation owners with scores of slaves whose labor sustained a kind of privileged, elite society of silver buckles, powdered wigs and lace cuffs. In this society the dictum that "all men are created equal" refers only to the propertied class to whom the responsibilities of government have been entrusted. The rest of humankind were simply not encompassed in this category. But these presuppositions had no place in the thinking of the frontier. Turner pointed out that:

An optimistic and buoyant belief in the worth of the plain people, a devout faith in man prevailed in the West. Democracy became almost the religion of the pioneer. He held with passionate devotion the idea that he was building under freedom a new society, based on self government, and for the welfare of the common man.³

Thus Turner affirms: "This much is clear: American democracy is fundamentally the outcome of the experiences of the American people in dealing with the West."⁴ He insisted that the frontier shaped the American character and infused into succeeding generations of Americans those peculiar characteristics that even today, two generations after Turner's death, make Americans a unique people.

It must be noted, as we pass on from Turner's thesis, that it did not meet with immediate or widespread acceptance. However, it created a whole new school of historians known as the Progressive School, the leading exponent of which was Charles A. Beard. While it is tempting to tarry longer with Frederick Jackson Turner and his thesis, that would take us too far from our purpose here today.

II

Among the historians who were attracted to Chicago at this time was a promising young Disciple named Winfred Ernest Garrison, son of the Editor of The Christian Evangelist and a recent graduate of Yale Divinity School. He became associated with The Disciples Divinity

House established in 1894 in response to an invitation by the university to the leading denominations to establish a federated theological faculty for graduate studies. Precisely when Garrison began to apply the Turner paradigm to the development of the Disciples is difficult to determine. It was not until he published his history of the Movement under the title: Religion Follows the Frontier that we see the full-blown extent to which he saw the expansion of the Movement in terms of the Frontier Thesis. Garrison makes his analytical presupposition quite clear in the Preface to his volume. He states:

For students of social and religious history who may not be specially interested in the Disciples of Christ, the significance of this body lies in the fact that it is a typical case of a group originating on the frontier, embodying in its first period the intellectual and cultural characteristics of the frontier, and gradually undergoing modifications of attitudes structure and interests with the passing of the frontier stage, the developing economic, social, and cultural life of its environment, and the urbanization and sophistication of what had been a simple and rural society.⁵

While recognizing that Alexander Campbell was the seminal thinker of the Disciple Movement, Garrison points out that "in the history of a religious body the most significant factors are not its doctrines or its philosophical backgrounds, but rather the responses which it

makes to the changing social and cultural situation in which it finds itself." ⁶ Noting that Disciples' growth did not stem from immigration, he suggests that the simplicity of the Disciple message had immense appeal to the people on the frontier where Disciple growth is found. "What could be simpler? Just go back to the original records and see what Christianity was before it became corrupted and complicated."⁷ If this formulas seems simplistic to later generations, it was most attractive to the frontiersman. The simple form of the five-finger exercise cut through the complex maze of traditional theology in a way that recommended itself to the practical, common-sense approach of the average man. The "plan of salvation" was egalitarian, addressed to all people alike, something that could not be said for a doctrine of election. And it made sense to the man who understood action more readily than theory. The message suited the individualism of the culture in that each person was judged to be competent to weigh for himself the evidence supporting the Gospel and was responsible before God for the decision he freely made.

Garrison relied heavily on Turner's analysis when Turner emphasized the individualism of the frontier. The pioneer had complete confidence in his own ability to handle the concrete and factual details of life, but he was not the least bit interested in abstractions.

"Accustomed to handling simple tools, to living in a society of simple structure, to attacking directly and almost bare-handedly the arduous but obvious tasks which confronted him,

he had little patience with processes which did not yield immediate results, and he had great faith in short cuts and simple methods."⁸

Garrison concluded that "The social and psychological characteristics of frontier life set the pattern which religion on the frontier followed."⁹ The message of the Disciples adjusted to this pattern to a remarkable degree, accounting in large measure for the rapid growth of the Movement prior to the passing of the frontier.

But the frontier was a passing phase in the evolution of the nation. Frederick Jackson Turner identified the passing of the frontier with the exhaustion of the supply of good, free land, about 1880. But if the frontier passed, the frontier mentality certainly did not. It lingered until it was displaced by vast numbers of immigrants who arrived in America too late to experience the frontier and who instead were crowded into the new cities created late in the 19th century by rapid industrialization. The frontier mentality is by nature a rural mentality and it survives urbanization with great difficulty.

It was Garrison's contention in Religion Follows The Frontier that Disciple history demonstrates the struggle to outgrow the frontier mentality. He held that Alexander Campbell took the lead in this effort. Anticlericalism and extreme congregationalism, so congenial to the frontier mind and expressed in The Christian Baptist, is seen clearly in 1849 in the individualism that insisted that the meetings of the American Christian Missionary Society be mass meetings when Campbell

preferred that they be delegate assemblies. This same mentality is usually credited with the subsequent wreckage of the Louisville Plan, which was adopted in 1868 and died in 1874. Garrison, who lived through the difficult 20's and whose book is largely an attempt to explain the schism in the ranks of the Disciples, concludes:

The deeper meaning of all the controversies which have disturbed the harmony of the Disciples during the past thirty years must be sought in the diversity of attitudes toward what may, to use a vague term, be called "liberalism"; and this, in turn rests upon a diversity of reactions to those social, cultural, and intellectual changes which have accompanied the passing of the frontier.¹⁰

Thus, Garrison viewed the controversies that traumatized the Disciples and created schism as "the internal tensions which have arisen within the total group in the course of its hundred-year journey from the frontier to the urbanized and socialized culture of today."¹¹ While such a sociological accounting of the division in our ranks must be viewed as an over-simplification, I am inclined to believe that there is much truth in Garrison's thesis. Considerable elements of the frontier mentality survived in the culture of rural America, a culture that differed in many ways from the urban culture of the developing nation. Rural people did not experience the regimentation that was often the daily lot of the factory worker. They weren't accustomed to supervision from a shop foreman or depend-

ent upon a paycheck that could be terminated by a plant layoff. Rural people belonged to no union that negotiated their own kinds of closed doors. While facing their own kinds of challenges, and often knowing uncertainty and privation, rural folk nonetheless maintained and often displayed a kind of fierce independence that was denied to their urban cousins. At the turn of this century most Americans lived on farms, and the vast majority of these farms were family enterprises. The rural mind did not understand the advantage and efficiency of corporate centralization nor was it sympathetic to the problems of an industrial society. It knew nothing of the confinement or the many tensions of urban life, which was the daily lot of the city dweller. Innovations in transportation and communication and the so-called modern conveniences were later coming to rural communities than to the cities so that a very different life-style and frame of thinking distinguished the rural person from his urban counterpart. This different mentality is quite apparent in the trauma that developed in the Movement during the first third of this century. Some of the developments which had great appeal to the urban mind were fearful or repugnant to the rural person. The schism which followed left evidence of not only a theological cleavage but of a very distinct sociological polarization as well. Opposition to moves toward centralization of the agencies was largely a rural phenomenon. Not to overlook the serious theological division that resulted from our contact with the Modernist movement, we have still to take account of the fact that the cleavage had a very evident sociological dimension as well. I first became

aware of this more than fifty years ago when I enrolled in Cincinnati Bible Seminary. I could not understand why most of the students came from places I had never before heard of; it seemed that I was one of a very few who grew up in a city. There were a few from places like Atlanta and Savannah, but prior to World War II these were only big towns. Some years later Joe Dampier pointed out to me the fact in the yearbook listing almost all of the county-seat churches were listed as supporting the united work while the rural churches usually numbered among the non-contributors. This disclosure confirmed my personal experience in the limited scope of my own ministry. Of course there are exceptions because sociological fissures never resemble clean surgery, but the exceptions seem to be just that. It is hard to escape the conclusion that there is a strong link between the independent spirit of the frontier which survived in rural America and the resistance to the centralization and the modifications which were introduced into the organized work of the Disciples of Christ in the early decades of this century. It is no accident that the missionary enterprise which developed after 1926 adopted and heralded an independent format, or that some of the Bible Colleges that developed as independent agencies advanced the claim that they championed "the open field". This gave expression to their framework of independent thinking and it is highly doubtful if they could have survived in this environment under any other banner.

III

Conflicts breed new dogmas, dogmas that are tailored to the very points at issue. These

dogmas are then incorporated into creeds in order to distinguish the orthodox from the heretics. This is seen clearly at Nicaea, Chalcedon, Trent, Augsburg, Westminster, and the examples can be multiplied. While our Movement admits of no creeds, we have had our share of conflicts; and our conflicts have spawned new dogmas which we incorporate into our unwritten creeds for the same purpose: namely to identify the orthodox and to mark the heretics. Unwritten creeds are just as potent and less subject to critical examination than written ones. The classic example in our case came out of the conflicts of the last century, conflicts which created the anti-instrument dogma which certainly distinguished the true believers from the heretics and justified, in the minds of many, a rupture in our fellowship. Such a dogma serves two purposes. First it assures those who subscribe to it that they are more faithful to the Biblical intent and hence more pleasing to God than are their antagonists; and second, it serves to obscure the real dynamics that are at work to produce the schism. The dedication and fury that is generated to propound the new dogma (always perceived to be as old as the New Testament itself) blinds the proponents to the operative motivations that really drive the cause. It was less a passionate devotion to musicology that moved the majority of the southern churches to condemn the northern congregations that introduced instrumental music than it was the sectional bitterness that lingered from the suffering and poverty which the south endured from the dreadful conflict over slavery and secession. The sectional and regional nature of that schism is just now beginning to be appreciated by most of the historians of

the Movement.

However, while dogmas persist, issues change, often rendering the dogmas anachronistic. To crystallize the issues of one generation into dogmatic form is to impose a heavy burden on succeeding generations to maintain a commitment and enthusiasm for a position which they often consider to be irrelevant and to which they cannot heartily subscribe. We see this today in the non-instrument churches where many candidly admit that the majority of the people in the pew and many ministers would actually welcome a musical instrument, in spite of decades of intense propaganda to the contrary. These brethren are currently paying a heavy price in terms of loss of members, especially young people, in their effort to maintain this distinctive, out-dated dogma. Not a few in the Churches of Christ are becoming restive about it.

We would be naive to assume that the bitter conflicts of the 1920's produced no new dogma for us. A decade of furious controversy over new policies adopted by the organized work of the brotherhood culminated in bitter frustration at Memphis in 1926. This frustration caused many to conclude that organization was, by nature, intransigent and incapable of popular control; hence organization itself became the real problem. To organize was wrong. Not only was it wrong, it was unbiblical! No organization is found in the New Testament. The silence of the Scripture, so vital to our justification for adding the musical instrument, seemed to speak very decisively when it came to utilizing organization. The fact that we had spent a decade of intense effort to salvage the

organizations didn't seem to carry any weight. In the heat of this controversy little account was taken of the fact that there are many different kinds of organization that characterize church bodies. No! All organization is bad! Several missionaries resigned from the society and struck out on their own.¹² A radical independency emerged and this became our ecclesiological pattern. It evolved as a reaction to developments which others saw as vital to the demands of effective religious activity in the twentieth century but were perceived by their opponents to be a threat to their freedom and their loyalty to their religious heritage.

Today our churches no longer reflect the rural mentality which was so prevalent in the early decades of this century. The fact is that many once-rural churches are now suburban congregations. Today only one percent of the American population earns its livelihood on the farm while the majority of those living in the country work in cities and are at one with the urban mentality. We have developed a goodly number of mega-churches, all of which are urban. The old, frontier spirit of independence that survived in rural America is almost gone. It last vestige of survival is in the field of religion where individualism is still a powerful force, but its inadequacy is becoming more apparent in this field. After the passage of almost seven decades it is not inappropriate to ask some relevant questions, like: Was the ecclesiological method under which we operate the result of a careful study designed to insure the maximum benefit of the resources which God has entrusted to our stewardship? Was it thoughtfully formulated to preserve individual

creativity and initiative while protecting the interest of the whole; or did it simply emerge out of the flames of conflict without any kind of rational direction? Please do not conclude that I see the struggles of these years as entirely a matter of differing sociological perspectives; I am fully aware of the theological issues of the day. But, we have too long overlooked the sociological dynamics that played such a massive role in that conflict, and we have failed to recognize how these sociological dynamics impinged on how we read the New Testament. It is my contention that the frontier characteristic of rugged independence lingered after the passing of the frontier in the mentality of our rural and small town churches and asserted itself in the extreme independency that developed within our corporate life. And, furthermore, just as the Churches of Christ are paying a heavy price to maintain their anti-instrument dogma, so our distinctive dogmas of radically independent corporate methodology exacts from us a very heavy price. We pay this toll in a number of ways. One is in the area of missions, where we pour enormous sums and where we have a proverbial absence of accountability. It is no criticism of the many responsible missionaries who serve us well to point out what we all of us know and seldom admit, except to close friends, that there are numerous examples of abuse of trust in the mission enterprise. Max Ward Randall, than whom there is not a more devoted student of the missionary effort, noted recently that "independent missions can become a refuge for scoundrels". But there are many other areas of our corporate life where the inadequacies of our total independency is clearly evident. Who hasn't bled when ministers have suffered

injustice and there is nobody to turn to for help, or when congregations have encountered serious problems and the nearby churches are totally indifferent, except for the prospect of picking up a few of their disgruntled members. And haven't we witnessed the proliferation of Bible colleges beyond any rational need, failing to realize that each new one drains off resources that are vital for the survival and development of existing ones, colleges into which many brethren have poured their sacrifices for the advancement of the cause? But, to some in our midst the suggestion that there ought to be some restraint on this kind of free-lance private enterprise and some kind of accountability to the larger interest of the whole brotherhood flies in the face of our distinctive and cherished dogma and is regarded by many as the rankest of heresies. Theologically, the dogmas that the Church exists ONLY in the local congregation is defective and it is not faithful to the teachings of the New Testament.

IV

In concluding, I borrow from the title of another of Dr. Garrison's books: Heritage And Destiny, to ask: If this is our heritage, what can we see as our destiny? It is dangerous for historians, who deal mostly with the past, to attempt to predict the future. Garrison's historiography is much superior to his predictions. But in our case it would seem to be quite appropriate to raise some questions regarding our destiny as we approach the end of the twentieth century. I hope it would not be deemed heretical to ask if we are still committed to the aims found in our

heritage, a heritage that seeks to restore Biblical Christianity as a means of promoting that unity of Christ's people that will advance the aim of evangelization of the world. And if we are yet committed to his heritage, to inquire if we are actively at work to realize these aims. We are not a large religious body, but we have been endowed with considerable resources. Do we utilize these resources intelligently to realize ends that are in keeping with our purpose for existence? The culture in which we live has developed some rational methodologies for the achievement of defined objectives. The establishment of clearly defined goals and the application of the necessary resources to achieve these goals is the way progress is made in our society. To hold that the New Testament forbids this method of rational approach to our larger goals, a method which every one of our institutions (also justified by the silence of the Bible) employs to insure their own progress and development, is to impose a restriction on our future by means of the same type of dogmatic anachronism that is eating away the vitality of the anti-instrument Churches of Christ. It perpetuates inertia and insures frustration. Our rejection of legitimate corporate leadership prevents us from realizing the potential inherent in our Restoration Plea. We strangle our future when we refuse to develop the leadership that is critical to the realization of its potential. Time permits but a single example to make my point. Our churches place a high priority on evangelism and new church establishment. A few years ago an excellent program was conceived by some of our ministers to promote these ends. It is known as Double Vision. It was projected as a brotherhood-

wide program. It sputtered and failed simply because we do not have the means of projecting a brotherhood-wide program. To have been a success, Double Vision would have required promotion beyond the capability of a few people on an ad hoc basis. To succeed, Double Vision should have had an analysis of the specific locations where new churches were most strategic, followed by a systematic approach for the assembling of the resources and the application of these resources to the realization of the goals. The 100 or more Evangelistic Associations we now have should have been enlisted in a systematic effort for church planning. This process then demands a wide and vigorous promotion to rally the interest and support of all of our churches. None of this happened, not because our people would not have supported Double Vision. It aims and goals are totally consistent with the oft-stated priorities of our people. Double Vision floundered because everybody's business is nobody's business; because there are no means available to make these necessary things happen. We have no programmatic leadership. The North American Convention is our only comprehensive, national gathering. Several years ago a suggestion was made that the Convention should assume some responsibility for programmatic leadership on a national scale. Timidly, the Convention leadership backed away from this challenge to lead. At every turn we find that our peculiar dogma stands in the way of accomplishing our desired goals. We are like a congregation sensing the need to erect a church building. We have the blocks and the brick and mortar, but we reject the notion that anybody should come up with a plan that would suggest how the brick and mortar should be put together to produce the

desired building. Instead, we insist that if everybody would just grab a trowel and start laying brick the result would somehow be a church building. Worse, we contend that acting in this hap-hazard manner is the Divine will. What we really have denied to ourselves is the application of intelligent planning to problem solving and goal achievement. That which we value as of critical importance on the local church and parachurch institutional levels we staunchly reject on a national level. As a result, many of our leaders, especially those of the younger generation, are frustrated and discouraged by the inertia that prevails among us on a national level.

It is not my intention to sound pessimistic as we look to the future. I am confident that, just as today many in the non-instrument churches are questioning the validity of their peculiar dogma so a generation of leaders further removed from the trauma of the 1920's will take a fresh look at the inertia imposed upon us by our peculiar dogma and will eventually come to the sensible decision that the Church of God reached some years ago when they concluded: "We do not organize the Church, but we must organize the WORK of the Church if we are to be at all effective". Such a decision would put into place a rational methodology where now there exists a tragic leadership vacuum justified only by some unfortunate events experienced more than half a century ago. I believe that the day will come when we accept the fact that worthy goals don't "just happen", that worthy goals deserve adequate planning and execution, and that leadership by competent and dedicated persons is not a thing to be feared. Some day we, as a people, will emerge from the long

shadow of Memphis 1926, and we will conclude that the ministry of our national gathering is something greater than simply to hold another convention next year. Somehow just holding another Convention doesn't exhaust the possibilities of our historic plea.

ENDNOTES

¹Turner, F. J., The Frontier In American History (New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1920) cited in Billington, R. A., The Frontier Thesis, (Huntington, N.Y., R. F. Krieger, 1977) p.29. For a good discussion of the controversy over the Turner Thesis, see the above, and Hofstadter, R., The Progressive Historians, p. 3-164

²ibid 28

³ibid 29

⁴ibid 29

⁵Garrison, W. E., Religion Follows The Frontier (New York, Harper & Bros., 1931), xi

⁶ibid xiii

⁷ibid 4

⁸ibid 56

⁹ibid 58

¹⁰ibid 301

¹¹ibid 309

¹²It should be borne in mind that the term "independent missionary" originally meant one who operated outside the scope of the UCMS. It did not imply a specific mission methodology which is believed to be mandated by Biblical precedent.