

THE CEPHAS PRINCIPLE

(With apologies to Laurence Peters)

by

William J. Richardson

THE CEPHAS PRINCIPLE

(With apologies to Laurence Peters)

Quite frequently today one hears the concept of restoration (the appeal to origins as normative) depreciated as no longer relevant to the immense challenges facing the church in our time. Three decades ago it was not uncommon in some circles to hear it said, "We Disciples have nothing distinctive to bring to ecumenical discussions." Today much the same lyrics are being sung but in places one would least expect.

It would be understandable if this attitude were a reflection of disappointment over a faltering movement. It would be equally understandable if this attitude were a protest against substituting loyalty to a slogan or movement for loyalty to Christ. The successors of Campbell and Stone have often been guilty of the fault of those who followed the great reformers of the sixteenth century who, according to W. A. Visser't Hooft, were so busy boasting of the Reformation they stopped reforming. Frequently, however, one hears the restoration principle depreciated in the missionary departments of Bible colleges -- as having no place alongside the mandate to evangelize the world and the search for effective methods for getting the job done.

I concur in the view that our task is not to win converts to the Campbell-Stone movement; to make an ardent restorationist of a native Zambian convert is no more desirable than to ask a convert in northern China to become a Southern Baptist. Nor do I disagree about the priority of mission and the assertion that other matters are secondary. But we must take care lest what we dismiss as secondary "other matters" turn out to have had a vital role in carrying out the mission.

Can the mandate to evangelize be carried out without concern for the nature of the church and its unity? It was not thought so at Edinburgh in 1910. More recently

Carl Henry posed this question to Evangelicals: "Does what He (Jesus) declares about. . . (the church and its unity) matter as much as what He says about evangelism?"¹ In turn, can one be concerned for unity without concern for the givenness of the church? Again it may be asked: Can the mandate for mission be carried out without a criterion of what that mission is? This is an important question in light of the different ways the mission of God is understood today.

What may be overlooked in this emphasis upon method is this: the method one employs, that is one's mode of speech and action, itself contains a message, a principle of its own. A criterion for mission based on an appeal to Christian origins may not seem important, but some criterion -- whether understood or acknowledged -- is embedded in whatever methods we employ. This is what I mean by "Cephas principle" as exhibited by the actions of the Prince of the Apostles in the incident reported in the second chapter of Galatians.

We get many examples from Peter. I could refer to his version of Murphy's law, which goes something like this: "I don't have to wait for things to go wrong, I can foul them up myself." However, in this instance Peter gave the name Cephas to another principle, although I am not sure he would be proud of the association.

At Antioch Peter was having table fellowship with Gentile believers. Unexpectedly some disciples from Judea entered the room. Peter, joined by Barnabas, quickly separated himself from his Gentile brothers.

We may understand this incident in the light of F. C. Bauer's theory of two competing parties and theologies in the First Century church (Pauline and Petrine) and read Luke-Acts as an attempt to gloss over the conflict. Or we may read Galatians in the light of chapters ten and fifteen of Acts: Peter's experience at Caesarea and his forthright stance at Jerusalem, which is attested in Galatians 2:9. In this case we

have not a disagreement over the Gospel, or even a misunderstanding, but a momentary inadvertence on Peter's part. He allowed the engrained habits of a lifetime to take precedence over what he knew to be right. At its worst it was a case of hypocrisy. In either case Peter conveyed a message by his actions. He was laying down a principle (a principle inherited in his actions); and Paul found it necessary publicly to expose that principle and the serious consequences it involved. Cephas, he declared, by this act (1) you have in effect declared that Gentiles must live like Jews; (2) you have turned back to the law, with the additional result that (3) you have made Christ an agent of sin. In other words, Peter's action contained implicitly a conception of the Gospel, a conception of the church and its fellowship (in contrast to Galatians 3:28), and a conception of mission.

The Cephas principle is this: a message, or maxim, is implicit in the modes of speech and action we employ in carrying out our ministry. Whether conscious of it or not we are advocating a principle in our manner of speaking and acting.

Perhaps there is no viable definition of restoration for our day. Many doubt that there is. But they who feel this way should remember that some principle inheres in what they choose to do and in their choice of means for doing it. I might note in passing that a number of persons who are embarrassed about the nineteenth-century reformation and its appeal to origins are willing to accept the restorationism of those who appeal to the order and ministry of the second century as a normative pattern. I have also noted more than a few of the overtones of Reformed covenant theology in those who claim to be only a Bible church; they may believe they are taking just the Bible without any presuppositions arising out of the history of theology, but in reality their position is riddled with such presuppositions.

I call your attention some examples of the operation of the Cephas principle. Several of these derive from

my reading of Alexander Campbell; I believe they are appropriate to our time.

ORDO SALUTIS

One has to do with what is known as the Ordo Salutis -- the order in which the factors of salvation are involved in the process of one's passing from the state of sin to redemption. Campbell recognized that most communions of what we call the "Evangelical Mainstream" retained certain elements in common; that is, they all emphasized faith; they saw a role for the Holy Spirit; they all stressed repentance, remission of sins, and baptism. But the order in which these elements were seen to stand varied greatly from group to group. This led Campbell to observe that "a different tune is played upon the same notes when the arrangement of them is changed. . . . different Gospels are preached from the different ordering of these items."²

In some instances baptism came first, followed in due time by effectual calling of the Spirit, then faith, then forgiveness and reformation.

In other cases it was the Holy Spirit, followed by faith, repentance, forgiveness, baptism.

Among revivalists it was regeneration by the Spirit, then repentance, faith, forgiveness, baptism.

Campbell, proceeding from common-sense psychology and his understanding of the Gospel as a proclamation concerning Christ, saw the order as proceeding from faith in Christ, followed by repentance (decision), baptism and remission, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In each case the arrangement itself contained a principle: the difference in the arrangement of these items embodied a difference in understanding of the nature of man, the nature of the Gospel and the evangelistic task, and the nature of the church

itself.

Campbell was particularly troubled by the insistence of so many in his day upon placing repentance before faith. Metanola, the term translated repentance, means change of mind. It may include regret but is primarily a change of mind, a re-formation. How then, asked Campbell, can repentance precede faith: how can persons repent of sin against a God they do not believe in? How can persons make the decision to commit their lives to Jesus as Lord, which is what metanola calls for (Acts 2:36-38), before they believe in Him?

Again a principle, often unstated, is involved. Placing repentance before faith is rooted in the insistence among both Protestants and Reformed that it is the function of the Law to produce conviction of sin; one first preaches against sin, using the Law, then offers the solace of the Gospel. Does this sound familiar?

Recently I had the delightful experience of meeting a young disciple, new to the faith but very sincere in his profession of it. He has a special concern for men who are down and out and has answered the "call" to preach to them. He preaches in downtown missions throughout the land. It required less than a minute for him to describe his method: "I carry with me a copy of the ten commandments," he said, "which I use to convict men of their sin, then I tell them about Jesus." He is probably unaware of the theological tradition that forms the basis for and is reflected in this methodology.

Campbell's reading of John 16:7-11 and Acts 2:22-38 convinced him that it is the preaching of Christ that produces conviction of sin. Whether Campbell is correct or not the case he presents illustrates a point: our method, in this instance our mode of speaking, contains a message of its own.

One might respond: "Well, in our church we just preach

the Bible." Yet in so simple a matter as the order in which one presents the message of the Bible is embedded a principle of profound significance. This is why Campbell gave so much attention to the "theory of regeneration," not because anyone is converted by a theory of regeneration, but because the theory gives shape to the method employed by the evangelist; the method, in turn, embodies the theory.

MISSION STRATEGY

But Campbell himself, despite what I consider a high batting average for consistency in adjusting practice to principle, fell victim to the working of the Cephas principle in his conception of mission strategy. The occasion was an address he delivered in 1849 entitled: "The Anglo-Saxon language, its origin, character, and destiny."³ It was not primarily a missionary address, yet reflects his commitment to mission. In fairness we should indicate that he was not setting forth here a complete strategy for mission.

Campbell recognized the significance of the language of a people; there is a close connection between the mind of a people and their language. Perhaps with more pride in his national heritage than he would have liked to admit he extolled the Anglo-Saxon language. It was a "language of languages" comprising terms from almost all the ancient and most civilized tongues of the world; it had drawn upon Greek, Hebrew, Latin, German and all the present languages known to the Anglo-Saxon peoples. Because of the strength of the Reformation in the British Isles the Anglo-Saxon language had become the language of Protestantism. Moreover, it was destined to become the common language of the world. In all sincerity, therefore, he believed this language to be an effective instrument for conveying the Gospel to the nations of the world. Therefore he could praise the British for their policy of compelling native children to learn the Anglo-Saxon language.

Instead of depending so much on the labors of

missionaries addressing the natives in their own tongues, they are qualifying and sending our school-masters to instruct the heathen children in the Anglo-Saxon tongue, that they may learn to understand the Anglo-Saxon Bible. This is as sound philosophy as it is genuine philanthropy. It gives to the young an incalculable advantage over the old, and interposes a great barrier between them and their parents, to prevent opposition to what they preach.⁴

We must not lay blame too heavily upon Campbell. He was hardly more than a half century beyond William Carey. Cross cultural communication was scarcely a developed science. It was still the era of the missionary compound concept of doing missions. Campbell was still growing in his understanding of missionary strategy; this was not his final word. Hence this strategy must be set beside his earlier proposal: move an entire congregation into a foreign context, have its members adopt the language, food and clothing habits of the people as well as their means of livelihood in order to communicate the Gospel effectively in that culture.

Nevertheless the British procedure he praised was loaded with principles and presuppositions that require examination.

--Does cultural-political dominance precede missionary endeavor; does Europeanization precede Christianization?

--Is deculturalization a necessary prelude to becoming a Christian?

--Are converts to be separated from family, or do family ties become bridges for communicating the Gospel?

--Can this approach to mission be reconciled with Paul's assertion: "To the Jew I became a Jew; to those outside the law I became as one outside the law." (I Corinthians 9:20)?

I believe Campbell was wise enough and sensitive enough that had he lived at a time other than the dawn of modern missions he would have adjusted his position

in this matter.

However, it is possible to err in the opposite direction, out of a desire for effective communication. Sensitivity to cultural differences requires a separation of western cultural accretions from the Gospel in seeking to communicate to people in their own context. This necessarily involves a choice of means; and a principle inheres in every means employed. Hence in this process there is a danger that the relativism that is nurtured by sensitivity to cultural pluralism may lead to a relativization of the Gospel itself, thus robbing it of integrity. If every truth is culturally and historically conditioned perhaps the Incarnation is also. Paul did not allow the Thessalonians to baptize their idols or to anoint their heathen customs with sanctity. He praised their decision to turn from idols to serve the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet how often in the history of the church have heathen gods been sainted in the guise of effective communication.

PRACTICAL MINISTRIES

I want to say a word about the increased emphasis today for putting practical tools into the hands of ministers and missionaries. We cannot, of course, fault the concern for practical ministries, provided it is not motivated simply by the need to attract and retain students or to stay afloat in the buyer's market that exists today in education. But there must be serious effort to insure that the principles implicit in the practicum are consistent with the content of our message.

Some years ago a student of my acquaintance made the decision to attend a particular one of our seminaries. One of his other professors, on hearing the announcement, retorted: "Why go to that school? They won't tell you how; they will only tell you why." There is a lot that goes on today in the name of preparation for ministry that is telling very much of the how and not enough of the why. The Cephas

principle warns us that there is a why implicit in every how. Our choice of means has implications about the nature of the Gospel and the nature of the church.

The seminary must have its ministries department, but what goes on there bears upon Biblical, historical, and doctrinal studies. We usually think of it the other way around -- of the effect that Biblical, historical and doctrinal studies have upon the practical; but we must be concerned also about what the methods taught in the ministries department have to say about the Gospel, the church, and the mission.

THE CHRISTLICHE GEMEINDE

To come still closer to home let us consider our work in Germany. All of us are familiar with the rationale of the European Evangelistic Society both in establishing the Institute for the Study of Christian Origins and in sponsoring a congregation in Tuebingen. To call the congregation there a Gemeinde was not intended as a negative statement, but rather as an attempt to call attention to a particular understanding of the nature of the church and its life. It is a koinonia, its life is defined and guaranteed by the relation of its members to Christ and to each other.

Here is a case where a principle (commitment to an order of the church in keeping with its genius given in its origin) was the ideal that governed the form taken by the community. The Society hopes that one day Germany and all Europe will be filled by communities bearing this mark of identity. How fortunate it would be if this development should come about as a result of the choice of believers themselves and not simply as the result of the secular state cutting churches off from its support.

What a dreadful responsibility to be a Christian Gemeinde in the European context today! Suppose a resident of Tuebingen saw only the sign Christliche Gemeinde and not the other which reads Institut zur

Erforschung des Urchristentums. What expectation would that person have? Or, in keeping with the theme of this address, what would an outsider observing only the life of the church see as the principle guiding that life? If the practice of the church were all that could be seen what would it say about the nature of the Gospel, the nature of the church, the meaning of Christian fellowship? Recall Professor Hoekendijk's challenge: "the acts of your koinonia speak so loudly that we cannot hear the words of your kerygma."⁵ Every congregation needs to hear this challenge.

What we learn from Peter at Antioch is that a principle is inherent in every method we employ. That this is not a particularly profound observation is not a measure of its significance. Whether we recognize it or not we are invoking a principle by our choice of means. Those today who regard the appeal to Christian origins irrelevant to the mandate for world evangelism may well consider that in the methods they choose to employ -- whether of modes of speech or practice -- they are in effect invoking a principle that serves as a criterion.

There is not time to identify all the principles that might be involved. I can only allude to some of them.

Not often is it a case of denying God's authority, at least among believers. How his authority is communicated to us, however, is a crucial issue. There are several alternatives, which have been set forth quite succinctly in Erich Hassinger's study of Luther's role in the rise of modern Europe, to which Roland H. Bainton calls attention in his own analysis of interpretations of the Reformation. Luther, says Hassinger, was far more original than he has been given credit for. The reason is Luther's

rediscovery of the historical core of Christianity. . . . The incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection constituted a unique self-disclosure of God in Christ. To Him the ages lead up and from Him the centuries lead

out. By faith in His redeeming work man is forgiven and remade.

However, to some this emphasis upon the historical uniqueness of Christ is offensive; people seek by various ways

to escape from the historical singularity of Christ. One is mysticism: God is accessible at all times equally to the waiting heart. Another is moralism: man is saved by his own good deeds done here and now. . . . still another is institutionalism: the church is the custodian and continuator of the revelation once and for all given.⁶

Hence there are four alternatives in understanding how God communicates His authority to us:

- appeal to the norm given in Christian origins and contained in Scriptures.
- claiming the immediacy of the Holy Spirit to validate our actions.
- reducing the Gospel to a set of moral precepts.
- appeal to ecclesiastical tradition.

Each of these has its advocates, witting or unwitting, shown in their choice of means for accomplishing what they see as their goal.

In still other instances -- and this is where most of us are affected by what I have had to say -- we may not be dealing with a fundamental principle at all, as is the case with the alternatives I have just named. It is rather a lack of awareness, like that of Peter, of the implications of our actions or choices of methods, with the result that we advocate a principle that is not consistent with our basic commitment or with our better judgment regarding the implications of the Gospel. Also like Peter at Antioch, we are probably not devious in our motives. But that does not make the consequences trivial. The Cephas principle can be insidious -- as Peter himself learned to his

embarrassment. And as one of our freshmen once concluded in a paper dealing with the seventh commandment: "This is a serious matter. You had best think twice before you do it!"

NOTES

1. Carl F. H. Henry, Christian Mind-set in a Secular Society (Multnomah, 1984), p. 31.
2. Alexander Campbell, Christian Baptist, 1828, pp. 486-488.
3. Campbell, Popular Lectures and Addresses. pp. 17-46.
4. Ibid., p. 43.
5. J. C. Hoekendijk, "The Call to Evangelism," Donald A. McCavran, Ed., Eye of the Storm (Waco, Texas, 1972), p. 54.
6. Erich Hassinger, Das Werden des Neuzeitlichen Europa 1300-1600 (Braunschweig, 1959). cited in Roland H. Bainton, "Interpretations of the Reformation," American Historical Review, LXVI, 1 (October, 1960), p. 77.

MAILING ADDRESS:

EUROPEAN EVANGELISTIC SOCIETY
James L. Evans, Executive Director
P.O. Drawer E
Atlanta, GA 30364