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J. James Albert writes about a call for unity

CALIFORNIA LETTER, November, 2011

Re: Robert Richardson and “Reformation”

Dear brethren, In more recent years I have become an avid admirer of **Robert Richardson** (1806-1876), biographer of Alexander Campbell, as well as his close friend and personal physician. Many years ago I read his *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* and more recently his *Communings in the Sanctuary*. Right now I am working my way through a series of articles he wrote for the “*Millennial Harbinger*” entitled “*Reformation.*” The series was started in 1847 and continued into 1850. There were nineteen installments in all. In 1848 Bro. Richardson was listed as a co-editor along with W. K. Pendleton. In 1849 and 1850 A. W. Campbell is also listed as a co-editor.

The *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* says, “Few individuals besides Thomas Campbell had more profound impact on the thinking of Alexander Campbell than Richardson.” Bro. Richardson had great insight and foresight. This is evidenced in his concern about issues and problems he saw developing in the movement in the 1840’s and 1850’s and which same issues and problems today significantly trouble the heirs of the movement. He saw “bibliolatry” as a rising problem, and in 1847 he wrote:

It should never be forgotten that the Apostles and first preachers of the gospel had no Bibles, and not even a New Testament, to distribute; and that there was no such thing

2 among the early Christians as a formal union upon the “Bible alone.” Nay, rather, it was a union upon the “Gospel alone.” For in those days the gospel possessed identity and enjoyed a distinct and determinative character.

In my lifetime the heirs of our movement have manifested considerable ignorance regarding the gospel, often confusing it with the teachings of the apostolic epistles and thus resulting in turning Christianity into a rationalistic patternism, seeking proselytes to particular parties. Each party claimed to be the only *true* believers because they correctly followed the pattern in alleged “acts of worship” in their Sunday morning “service.” Faithfulness or loyalty to Christ came to be measured by assent to the unwritten creed identifying the party rather than by trust in the “person” of Jesus Christ.

In my opinion, bro. Richardson’s insight into and warnings about some issues that would take the movement in the wrong direction, especially after the death of Alexander Campbell, is extraordinary. Let me share with you some more quotes from his series on “Reformation” and make a few comments. I find what he wrote enlightening and hope you do as well.

The Whole Truth

It is said that the Churches of Christ are comprised of about two dozen parties, each claiming to be representative of the whole truth. I was raised in a sect that boasts of being the only party representative of the whole truth and free of error. Of such declarations as expressed by sectarian creeds (in our case unwritten) bro. Richardson wrote:

But it is not to be admitted that any one of these systems contain truth unmixed with error. That no one is a full presentation of the whole truth would be a sufficient condemnation; for truth seen in part; is, when mistaken for the whole truth, converted thereby into error; and from the confidence which truth itself inspires, often leads to worse consequences than absolute falsehood.

But no one can suppose these systems are unmixed with error. Being contradictory to each other, but one of them could be true; and if this be affirmed of any one of them, it would not be difficult to show that this one is inconsistent with itself. If each presented “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” it would be in perfect harmony with all the rest, and every part of it would be consistent with every other; for no truth, either in nature or religion, can possibly be incompatible with any other truth. But there can be no such human system of religious belief.

Bro. Richardson then proceeded to put his finger on one of the major problems of creeds. What he says is true of creeds whether they be written or unwritten.

It cannot be justly urged that each party or each individual of a party, is at liberty to add to the truths in the formulary, and to renounce its errors. For no sooner does a member of any religious body presume to dissent from the standard of his church, than he is denounced as a heretic. The fear of incurring this censure, and the odium, usually centered with it, has the effect of preventing, in a multitude of cases, a public avowal of dissent, and induces, consequently, a hypocritical and empty adherence to theories and forms. But, in other cases, the discovery of error in the standard, or of new truth in the scriptures, leads men to declare boldly their dissent, and to encounter all the obloquy and persecution, usually awarded to such innovators. Thus the creed slathers the fearful and the unbelieving, but cannot contain the sincere lover of truth – the man who deserves to attain perfection and acts in harmony with the law of human progress.

Does all of this seem and sound familiar? Certainly! We in the Churches of Christ today personify what he wrote primarily in regard to the religious systems of his day. Our unwritten creeds have led us to hypocrisy, schisms, and divisions galore. They produce parties and perpetuate them. They increase rather than diminish the very problems they are designed to prevent.

4 Advocates of the whole truth concept, primarily the party leaders, run on fear, especially for their control, and they hinder growth and the search for truth. They drive out or exclude in one way or another some of the most faithful, knowledgeable, intelligent, and sincere believers.

Inconsistently they will not accommodate those who challenge or question their positions or practices or manifest sincere differences of understanding. Instead of the brotherhood or fellowship being a safe haven to pursue and discuss and learn truth there is a suspicion of anyone who expresses any form of “discontent” with the identifying opinions of the group. As a result, for fear of being blackballed or rejected, many brethren comply whether they believe these norms are true or not. Those who can’t do the same are driven out or leave on their own. Thus the errors of the group are calcified and the sincere pursuit of truth and unity is thwarted.

Bro. Richardson indicated that the very first step in reformation is to not put barriers in the way of conscientious believers who are searching for truth. Permit and realize that all believers do not possess the same abilities, degrees of knowledge, and understanding, and accommodate sincere differences of opinion. As the apostle Paul said, “Who are you to judge another’s servant. To his own master he stands or falls.”

The quotes by bro. Richardson in this letter were from his second installment of the “Reformation” series found in the 1847 volume of the “Millennial Harbinger.” Lord willing, I’ll write more “California Letters” using quotes from him. I hope they provoked your thinking.

In Him,

J. James Albert
