

IS IT TIME TO CHANGE? by Stafford North

In 1827, Walter Scott was chosen as the traveling evangelist for the Mahoning Baptist Association of which Alexander Campbell's Wellsburg Church was a member. In this role, Scott preached to a religious world primarily Calvinistic in theology. The common view held that God chose who would be saved and notified those chosen by giving them a "religious experience." This experience, often taking place at the "mourner's bench," could be "the singing exercise," "the barking exercise," "the falling exercise," or some other "feeling" about which one could testify. Such experiences were considered proof a person had been "chosen" and thus, was saved and could not be lost.

Walter Scott, through his own study and through contacts with Campbell and others, knew such beliefs were not the teaching of scripture. In his preaching to churches of the Mahoning Baptist Association, he became the first among those restoring New Testament Christianity actually to evangelize on the truths Campbell, Stone and others had espoused. They had written about them and defended them in debate, but Scott was the first publicly to call people to obey them. During his first year as a traveling evangelist, Scott baptized over a thousand "for remission of sins."

In the nearly two hundred years since that time, great changes have taken place in the "Christian" world. William Adams, in his introduction to *Elect in the Sun* by Robert Shank, wrote, "Let it be remembered that, less than a hundred years ago, all five cardinal points of Calvin's system of theology generally prevailed among Baptists, as theological textbooks of the time will confirm. Today, only one point remains to any appreciable extent among Baptists, inevitable perseverance, and there is growing evidence that Baptists are increasingly questioning this last vestige of the central core of Calvin's system of theology."

Other religious bodies have changed since 1827 as well and, in many cases, these changes have brought them closer to what those in the Restoration Movement understand the Bible to teach. Many "community churches," for example, have sprung up which often bear many similarities to us. These "Bible churches" often have elders, renounce the denominational approach to Christianity, sometimes sing *a cappella*, and in some cases, even baptize for forgiveness of sins. In fact, one of the best books written recently against the use of instruments in worship comes from Baptist minister John Price, whose congregation recently became *a cappella*.

All of this movement toward the teaching of scripture is not, of course, the direct result of our efforts at restoration, but some of it is. In an earlier generation we had debates with the leading figures in many denominations, thus exposing them to our understanding of scripture. They have certainly had access to our publications and some have attended our schools. And, as demonstrated in Everett Ferguson's *The Church of Christ: An Ecclesiology*, leading scholars among all faiths have concluded that the positions we hold are, indeed, the teaching of scripture. In short, there has been a movement among many

in “Christendom” toward what have been teaching for the past two hundred years. While some, of course, are moving in other directions, the belief of many is growing closer to what we understand scripture to teach. It is also clear that churches moving away from stronger doctrinal teaching are tending to decline while those seeking to move closer to scripture are growing.

So here is the main point. At the very time there is movement toward the teaching of scripture by many outside of our fellowship, some in our fellowship want us to move away from what we have taught. They are uncomfortable with positions which, they say, are not “inclusive” enough, and so they advocate that we leave positions we have held to accept “broader” doctrinal positions. This would, they say, allow us to consider more people as saved.

Let me, however, advance a different proposition. There is a strong need in “Christendom” for a body of people who understand and practice Christianity as it was in the first century. Holding such a model before the religious world is not only true to scripture but can help bring others to this understanding. That has been and should remain our goal.

We do not have to operate in a “condemning mode” to do this. What we have to do, rather, is to operate in a mode of demonstration and proclamation. We baptize for remission of sins, for example, because that is what the Bible teaches, and because it is what the early church practiced. When we are asked, as I was last Wednesday night, “What will God do in judgment with an un-baptized believer?” we can reply that God does not authorize us to judge the salvation of individuals, but we find no scripture which offers such a person the promise of salvation. God has not revealed just how He will handle every situation in the judgment. Will the un-baptized believer, for example, be treated differently than one who has intentionally rejected Christ altogether, or than one who never heard of Jesus at all? We don’t know how God will handle every case.

And this is just the point. In saying “Our role is not to make final judgment of others,” we can add, “we do know, however, that God promised salvation to the faithful baptized believer.” Surely we should not trust our souls to a position of “I don’t know,” when we can stand in “I am sure.” Or even more to the point, why would any of us want to lead someone to a doctrinal position that could only allow us to say, “This may be acceptable,” when we could lead them to a position of “Based on scripture, I can be sure.” No one, for instance, can find scripture which, when fully understood, promises salvation to one who rejects baptism “for forgiveness of sins.” One can, however, find a promise of salvation to those who believe, repent and are baptized to be forgiven.

The same approach can be taken to the instrumental music question. “Will God send a person to hell just for worshiping with an instrument?” We know God has dealt severely in both the Old Testament and the New with people who have varied from his prescribed plan for worship. And yet, He has not revealed to us exactly how He will deal with the person who adds instruments to the specified singing. To this question, then, we say, “Since God has not specifically revealed the answer to that question, we can’t say for

sure.”” And again, that is just the point. Why would any of us want to stake our souls on a position about which we cannot be sure when we can have a position of certainty? No one doubts that unaccompanied singing from the heart is acceptable as worship to God. If you were teaching someone what music to use in worship, with certainty you could teach them to sing, but you could have no such certainty in teaching them to use instruments. So why would you encourage them to take a chance by using instruments?

Or, to take another example, no one can be certain that God approves of women as leaders in public worship. God has not told us that He does. We can, however, be certain that male-led worship pleases Him as Paul commands in 1 Corinthians 14:33-34, and as the early church practiced when under apostolic direction. So why move from what we can be sure of to what we cannot be sure of?

Let's continue to see our role in churches of Christ as providing, as nearly as we possibly can, a picture of the early church for all to see, while proclaiming that gospel message of which we can be sure. Since such a position is both the teaching of scripture and the direction many are moving, *this is no time to change*. “See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us—even eternal life” (1 John 2:24-25).