**Division and Silence**

When the Disciples of Christ and the Church of Christ united in the 1830’s, it was achieved congregation by congregation, through traveling preachers and printed publications. This is because we are not a denomination and don’t have a centralized leadership from which comes massive edicts. In the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, we divided through the same process. The ACMS and instrumental music were the new topics for preachers and writers because of the things that happened during and after the Civil War that we talked about in the previous lesson.

Arguments against the Missionary Society were made predominantly by southern churches. It had become involved in politics (and not the politics of the South), it dictated to churches (southern churches felt this way because they were unable to attend meetings during the war), but their scriptural opposition to it was biblical silence. The Bible is silent on organization beyond the local congregation, so the ACMS was a prohibited “innovation”. The only problem is that those who favored the Missionary Society saw biblical silence as permission for “expedient aids” to the work of the Church, such as buildings, song books, etc. Does this sound familiar? (I’m putting my hand on my forehead as I write this). Most of the supporters for organizations beyond congregations were in the North, while most opponents were in the South. Is there any correlation with each side’s national political views? The North was for increased federal government over and above the individual states, while the South wanted each state to be more independent. Oh, what tangled webs we weave when we confuse spirituality and politics!

We talked in the previous lesson about the fact that southern congregations’ economic destitution effected their opinion of the organs in the North. The question of biblical silence was applied to this issue as well. The issue hadn’t arisen much in Stone-Campbell churches before the war because they were frontier churches that largely couldn’t afford organs. Both Stone and Campbell were against instrumental music in worship but certainly did not see it as a matter of fellowship. Remember, they didn’t even see baptism as being worthy of division. When Campbell spoke of being “silent where the Bible is silent”, he was allowing for opinions on what silence means. Some think it forbids, others think it permits. The “silence” Campbell called for was a humility that refuses to make these issues into matters of fellowship. They were not the first movement to argue against instruments. Zwingli and Calvin had both opposed it during the Reformation. The first instance of a Stone-Campbell church using an instrument was in Midway, KY in 1859. The minister, L.L. Pinkerton, brought in a melodeon to aid singing that was “so bad it scared even the rats from worship.” So, for the most part instruments were only a thing in our movement after the civil war. Southern churches were against them because of Northern wealth. Their scriptural argument was biblical silence, which northern churches saw as permission, precisely the same as the Missionary Society issue. The interesting part is, the hermeneutic concerning biblical silence changed from prohibition to permission as often as the weather changes in Virginia. Some preachers, Moses Lard and J.W. McGarvey being two, used permissive silence to argue for the ACMS, but used prohibitive silence to preach against the instrument.

Although most leaders tried to avoid this issue being divisive, it was inevitable. There were other disagreements during this time such as whether ministers should stay with one local congregation or travel, whether they should be paid, etc., but the instrument was the giant wedge that was driven between us. Daniel Sommer was a preacher who pushed for this division. In 1889 he wrote “An Address and Declaration” (presumably playing off Campbell’s “Declaration and Address”) in which he stated that instrumental music was an apostasy. He made a sharp distinction between the Church of Christ and the “so-called Christian Church”. He outlined his plan for saving the true Church from “innovations and corruptions”. If churches would not give up their practices of instruments, missionary societies, located preachers, etc., “we cannot and will not regard them as brethren.” For many years men like David Lipscomb and T.B. Larimore were reluctant to acknowledge division and strove for unity. In 1904 Lipscomb began making a list of churches and preachers in the movement. In 1907, the Bureau of Census asked him whether the Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ were two distinct groups and he sadly admitted they were.

Larimore (1843-1929) was born into poverty in East Tennessee and baptized in Kentucky during the Civil War. He studied under Tolbert Fanning, an outspoken southern preacher and writer. Larimore was a loyal son of the South, heavily influenced by opponents of missionary societies and instruments. He personally opposed both, but refused to declare himself publicly because he believed the body of Christ should not divide over such matters. He believed that the men who disagreed were wiser than himself, on both sides of the argument. He saw himself as an evangelist who proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus. He baptized over 10,000 souls in his lifetime. He constantly found himself under pressure to take sides in these discussions. Both sides criticized him harshly, but he refused to engage. Although his personal leaning was against both practices, he knew that the only way to avoid division was to allow for freedom of thought in these matters. T.B. Larimore refused to break fellowship with his brothers and sisters who were, in his opinion, wrong on these issues.

It’s shameful when we think about the lines that our movement has drawn or not drawn. We tried not to take a stand against slavery, but demand that all members stand up and be counted on instruments. Why, when we didn’t divide on much heavier, more important issues, such as baptism, trinity, etc., did we divide so easily on a far less important issue such as instrumental music? I think the reason is two-fold. First, our motivations were not initially scriptural, but political and economic. The lesson we learn is that politics and bitterness over our neighbor’s wealth has more danger to divide us than any doctrinal squabble. Second, the instrument is immediately visible. I can worship with someone for months without ever knowing his leanings concerning race, or the trinity, for example, but I know immediately upon walking into a church building whether they worship with instruments, and some feel forced to take an immediate stance.

I have my leanings concerning instruments and other matters of biblical silence. Perhaps I agree with brother Larimore, that I am personally against them, but refuse to break fellowship with my brothers and sisters who are, in my opinion, in error on the issue. Perhaps I will repent of past divisiveness and be truly “silent where the Bible is silent.”