

## Robert Richardson: Campbell's Alter Ego

“This reformation was born of a love of union,  
and union has been its engrossing theme.”

The most articulate interpreter of Campbell's plea was his family physician and biographer, Dr. Robert Richardson, who may be thought of as his alter ego. Of a highly cultured Episcopalian background, Richardson came into the Movement by way of his contact with Walter Scott. He served on the faculty of Bethany College and as an associate editor of the *Millennial Harbinger*, along with being a trusted friend and adviser of the man he most admired, Alexander Campbell.

He may well have been the most perceptive thinker and most lucid writer of the early period. In 1853 he published an 88-page book on *The Principles and Objects of Religious Reformation, Urged by A. Campbell and Others, Briefly Stated and Explained*. Richardson's biographers think it deserves to be called the “Disciple Manifesto” and describe it as “a model of brevity, comprehensiveness, and clarity.” It was a revision of essays that had appeared in the *Millennial Harbinger*, and it is here that they are readily available today.

On the eve of the book's appearance Campbell wrote in his journal that its author had been associated with the reformation for a quarter of a century and was well posted on its history. He hailed it as “a well proportioned miniature” of the plea. He further said that it was written in a lucid and chaste style and was worthy of both the author and the cause. He might have added that it provided for both the church and the world the most attractive *apologia* yet set forth as to what the Movement was all about.

At the outset Richardson placed the Movement within the “Reformed” tradition, showing that its purpose was to continue what the reformers of the sixteenth century began. *Reformed* cannot mean that the job is complete. Reformation by its very nature is gradual and progressive. Not only is truth slowly learned, but conformity to it is also slow. However acute a reformer's mind may be, he cannot, when first aroused from the lethargy of ages, at a glance comprehend the whole of divine truth.

The Movement's mission is not, therefore, to disparage the labors and learning of past reformers or to renounce the leading doctrines of Protestantism, but to advance in Christian knowledge and make larger discoveries of divine truth. In the Protestant standards themselves are truths and principles of reform that are neglected, and it is the Movement's task to recover these and other truths and thus restore “a pure primitive Christianity in form and spirit, in principle and practice.”

Such a restoration can be realized only when believers are left free to study and think for themselves and not be bound by human authority. He thus speaks of “liberty of conscience and the right of private judgment” as necessary for an ongoing reformation. This is hindered by the imposition of creeds, and anything that obstructs man's progress in divine things must be wrong. “With what consistency,” he asks, “can we reject a decision of the Pope and yet submit to one of the primate?”

He gets to the heart of the plea when he contends that unity can come only through “the generalization of Christianity,” and that it is in particularizing and in contending for microscopic details that the church has divided into a multiplicity of sects. It is both vain and hopeless to expect the world to accept any particular set of opinions or system of doctrines. People can agree on the general truths and facts of Christianity, and it is only here that unity is possible. He has a neat way of saying “That alone which saves men can unite them.”

The doctor reminds his readers of the difference between the Bible and the gospel. The early Christians did not unite upon the “Bible alone,” for they did not even have the Bible, but upon the “gospel alone,” and they

certainly did not have to understand the bible alike. In those days the gospel possessed identity and distinction in that it was God's power to save, not the whole of revelation. The church thus unites upon *the gospel*. "Let the Bible be to us every thing designed by its author," he says in pointing the way to unity, "but let 'Christ crucified' be not only our peace with God, but our peace with one another."

"This reformation was born of the love of union," he said, "and Christian union has been its engrossing theme." The basis of such a union is in the confession of the great fundamental truth of Christianity, that Jesus Christ is the son of God, which is the *common* faith. He observes that all through its history the church has sought to reconcile unity of faith and liberty of opinion, and he was convinced that his people had found the solution.

There is a way for all believers to unite in the one Body without retrenching from the principle of liberty of opinion. This is to unite upon the facts of the gospel while allowing diversity of opinion in doctrine. It is the "restless zeal for purity of doctrine" that has given us all the creeds, he avowed. The church has never really questioned the gospel, and so it is always a theory of religion that is made to justify or condemn. It is a creed that makes one a saint or sinner, not the gospel.

He hastened to add that in making the gospel itself the basis of unity the Movement has not deprecated the value of purity of doctrine, but has simply recognized that unity is possible only in the truth of the gospel and not in uniformity of doctrine. So, love of theory must give way to love of Christ. He saw *furor doctrinalis* as the congenital disease of Protestantism. Human nature has a need for certainty, which comes through the gospel, not through doctrinal theories.

Richardson noted that the big question in religion is not the one Pilate asked, "What is truth?," but rather "What is *the* truth?" He granted that while all truths are true, *all truths are not equally important*. "To expect entire uniformity of sentiment in the whole minutiae of Christian doctrine is utterly visionary and futile," he avowed. He identified the truth as "the simple gospel facts" and as the basis of unity. He claimed that Campbell's reformation is the only instance in all Protestantism that draws this important distinction.

Quoting from the *Declaration and Address* to the effect that fellowship must be based upon the gospel truth and not upon a proper understanding of all doctrinal matters, the doctor pointed to the vital distinction that had always characterized the Movement:

*Thus in the very beginning of this effort to reform religious society, the subject matter of a saving or essential faith was distinguished both from the uninspired deductions of human reason, and from those divine teachings which, however necessary to enable the believer to make proper advances in Christian knowledge, are by no means necessary to the Christian faith.*

The beloved physician, a familiar figure on horseback around Bethany with his top hat and long tails, thus emphasized the important distinctions that the Movement had discovered. But no distinction was more important than the one he drew between faith that is personal over against faith that is doctrinal. He affirmed that the faith that saves is faith in a Person, not in some system of doctrine. Doctrines are not the subject matter of faith, but a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Biblical faith begins with the acceptance of certain facts, but it goes on "to trust him as our Saviour, to walk with him as our teacher, our friend; to realize his gracious presence with us, and to discern his foot steps in the path we tread."

Unlike most of the other leaders at that time, including Campbell, Richardson emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, which he described as "a fountain from within." To the sinner the spirit is an outward witness to the truth through the gospel, while to the Christian it is a witness from within.

It is evident, therefore, that by the 1850's the Movement was maturing in leadership, outreach, and message. It had reached out to several continents with some 2,000 churches and 200,000 members. Its "Plea," as it came to be called had no uncertain sound, and it was being heard by the multitudes and responded to by many.