

Melodeons and Missionary Societies

Growth and optimism marked the Stone-Campbell Movement in the years following the union of the two groups in 1832. Barely twenty years later, however, two key issues would begin to divide the movement, eventually separating the two branches known today as the “Disciples of Christ/Christian Churches” and the “Churches of Christ.” One issue was the creation of missionary societies; the other was the use of musical instruments in worship.

In the years before the Civil War, denominations generally used Bible Societies and missionary societies to evangelize. Both Stone and Campbell, however, had opposed any organization beyond the local congregational level, believing such groups to be divisive and unauthorized by Scripture. Nevertheless, on October 23, 1849, a group led by D.S. Burnet met in Cincinnati for the express purpose of creating “a general church organization for the furtherance of the work by the church collectively.” This new organization, called the American Christian Missionary Society (ACMS), caused immediate disagreement among the churches. Many saw the organization as unscriptural and feared that it would detract from the autonomy of each congregation. Although Alexander Campbell did not attend the Cincinnati meeting, those present elected him as the president of the new society. Unexpectedly to some, Campbell accepted the position. However, he received much criticism for doing so because he had taken an uncompromising stand against societies in his early years.

During this same period, instrumental music was making its way into American churches. The first *recorded* instance of a Stone-Campbell congregation using instrumental music was in 1859, when L. L. Pinkerton introduced a small melodeon in the church at Midway, Kentucky. Pinkerton lamented that the congregational singing had degenerated into such “screeching and bawling” that it would “scare even the rats from worship.” While many approved of the organ, opponents deemed it “an instrument of Satan.” Less than a year later, the little organ mysteriously disappeared one night, only to be replaced by another soon after! The majority of urban congregations, particularly in the Northern states did not object to instruments, though rural congregations, particularly those in South, tended to oppose the trend. These sectional differences would only intensify in the aftermath of the Civil War (1861-1865).

In 1861 at the ACMS convention in Cincinnati, relationships fractured when someone made a motion—though the convention was in recess—in support of the Union. Two years later at the 1863 meeting, the ACMS passed an even stronger “loyalty resolution,” branding those who fought for the Confederacy as “armed traitors.” Churches north and south found themselves divided over issues of slavery, sectional loyalty, and, worse of all, Christians took up arms against each other. Stone, Campbell, and other leaders urged pacifism; still Christians felt compelled to choose sides. As James North notes, “When the shooting started, Christians of the Restoration Movement on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line acted just like their neighbors and joined the armies of the blue or gray and tried to kill as many of the enemy as possible.”

After the war, particularly in the South, bitter feelings further destroyed Christian fellowship. Holloway and Foster observe that, “after the war, many churches in the prosperous Northern cities became successful in society. They built large buildings with expensive stained glass. They preferred paid, educated ministers. They could even afford expensive organs for their new buildings... By contrast, Southern members faced starvation, disease, and economic ruin. To Southerners, it was inconceivable that their fellow Christians in the North could spend money on buildings and organs while their brothers and sisters in the South were struggling to just stay alive.” In the post-Civil War animosity between North and South, the musical instrument issue became a galvanizing point that forced churches to choose sides. By the late 1880s it would become a fellowship issue among many in the movement and remains with us today.