

DISTANT VOICES (a Review)

This book by Leonard Allen is sub-headed “**Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church.**” Bro. Allen is surely one of the most prolific writers of the change “fellowship.” This book, published by Abilene Christian University Press was issued in 1993, one of the earliest in the program designed to revise the history of the American Restoration Movement of which we are a part. For those who love our brotherhood history this is an interesting collection of information. The purpose of the author seems to be to raise questions about the things most surely believed and practiced by members of churches of Christ. Having sown doubt and shaken convictions, convincing our members to embrace his call for change would more likely succeed.

The author views our brotherhood history as a supermarket from whose many wares he picks only those random thoughts and ideas that meet the needs of his agenda and support his program of change.

He tells us that “seeing the past in a new light, however, can bring clarifying perspective and healing balm...It can provide the impetus toward reconciling old estrangements...” (p.3). When we realize that one of the goals of the promoters of change is a reconciliation with the Disciples of Christ and Christian Churches who departed from us a century ago. The reconciling, they have in mind in for us to do. They think our fathers were wrong in refusing to fellowship those who desired instrumental music in worship and missionary societies.

The author introduces novel ideas and practices found in the early days of our Back to the Bible Movement most of which were eventually rejected by brethren as they grew in the grace and knowledge of Christ. The unspoken conclusion he wishes us to draw is, “Oh my, we have departed from the original teaching and practices of the pioneers of our movement. Therefore all that we presently hold is questionable.”

* Chapter 2 is about inter-denominational communion services which Barton Stone and his friends participated in. He does not mention that at that point they had not even launched out on their quest for original Christianity. He also relates the “Pentecostal type of emotionalism” that was common at the Cane Ridge Revival. There was swooning, shouting and jerking as untaught people were stirred to excess by the powerful, emotional charged preaching of the various denominational speakers who addressed them. Of course when those of that number set out to find the old paths of Christianity, they soon abandoned that kind of foolish behavior for a more reasonable faith based upon the Word of God.

* In chapter 3 he relates “The Only Hope for Unity.” From the pen of Barton Stone he condemns religious debating as a practice that will “deaden piety...puff up the vain mind, annihilate the taste for the marrow and fatness of the living word...” (p. 17). Change agents would never debate their cause (Prov.25:9). They much prefer to spread their message in an environment where no one can challenge them. He then relates Stone’s call for “Fire Union by which he referred to union that emerged when disciples had the Holy Spirit dwelling within them (p. 19-20). All change agents fault us for not placing enough emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Of course some of them believe the Spirit enlightens their minds and supplies them miraculous gifts. He tells us that Stone concluded “that it is better to have written creeds than unwritten opinions that carry the authority of creeds” (p. 18). With this he subtly introduces a major cant of the change folks. When we insist we have no creed but the Bible, they insist we do have a creed; an unwritten one.

* In chapter 4 he tells us of a few female preachers he found in the early days of the movement. He finds one Nancy Cram and a half dozen other ladies who were associated with Elias Smith of the New England Christian Movement. He quotes Nancy Towle (1833), “The excluding of female gifts from the Church of God...I view, as an occasion of great provocation, and as one principal means of immense loss to the Church of the Lord Jesus...” (p. 22). He does not relate that Elias Smith was an erratic person who oscillated between his attempts at restoration and Universalism. Nor does he relate that the overwhelming majority of our preachers and churches did not accept women as preachers. Of course a principle plank in the change agenda

is the empowerment of Christian women and providing them a place in the public leadership of today's church today.

* In chapter 6 he relates the uniting of the movements of Stone and A. Campbell. He stresses all the things about which they disagreed. "But they disagreed on whether one should allow formal fellowship with the unimmersed. Stone said yes. Campbell said no" (p. 41). Change agents want us to fellowship all who believe in Jesus, whether or not they are immersed. Stone said that "in apostolic times, fellowship required agreement only on a few fundamental truths..." (p. 43). If we can be persuaded to accept the few fundamentals they propose, then they will be left free to change a dozen other aspects of the faith. One of the chief fallacies of Bro. Allen and his tribe is their attempts to make Alexander Campbell and/or Barton Stone's ideas the benchmark of our faith. They did not found the church, nor are they the head. All of that is the province of Christ. They were great and good men, struggling to escape from the ignorance and error of denominationalism that for 300 years had confused the Protestant world. Change agents love to pit Campbell against Stone and try to establish a spiritual climate of denominational diversity in which all beliefs are to be held in a state of flux. This would allow the promoters of change to stay in our midst, tolerated, while they work to gain dominance of the church.

* In chapter 7 he records Barton Stone's words, "I see no authority in scripture, why we should draw the conclusion, that the miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit, is, according to the will of God, withdrawn from the church" (p. 46). Of course Campbell rejected that idea and in the course of a few years so did all the preachers associated with the movement. Change agents seem to conclude that all truth was reached in the first generation of the movement. No allowance is made for growth in knowledge and understanding. They overlook that those noble men were struggling to rid themselves of denominational error, one scab at a time. Some spokesmen for change like to think that they supernatural gifts are yet available to those of superior faith. He also finds that Stone believed the saints will "reign with the Lord on the earth 1000 years..." (p. 52). To find acceptance among the Evangelical churches, some change agents are sympathetic with the speculations of the premillennialists.

* Chapter 8 is devoted to Alexander Campbell's **Lunenburg Letters** in which he expressed his belief that "everyone that believes in his heart that Jesus...is the Son of God; repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his measure of knowledge of his will...is a Christian" (p. 55-56). He concluded that there were indeed Christians among the various sects even among those not immersed. Granting the salvation of the pious unimmersed is a fundamental point of the change gospel. It is almost impossible for a promoter of change to write without reference to these ill-spoken letters of Campbell.

* Chapters 9, 10 & 11 are devoted to the theology of Robert Richardson, son-in-law of A. Campbell. Richardson disliked debating and doctrinal controversy. He especially disliked the influence of the English philosopher, John Locke whose "Common Sense" approach to thinking greatly influenced Campbell. He finds the following quote from Richardson to be very comforting for his program of change: "at no time have we separated ourselves, or denied fellowship to a Baptist brother, or refused to receive as a member any one accredited by a letter from a Baptist church. We have, in reality, ever claimed the Baptists as our brethren" (p. 75). This they want for us. He delights in Richardson's **Communings in the Sanctuary** and his exploration of mysteries of the religion of Christ. The postmodern mind relishes and craves the mysterious in religion (p. 80-82). This is most evident in the various New Age cults, whose terminology and ideas keep surfacing in the literature of the promoters of change.

* Chapters 12-14 are devoted to peculiar views of David Lipscomb such as his belief that Christians should not be involved in civil government and that they should not participate in carnal war. Few if any among us today (including Allen) hold these views. Of course he does not dwell on the fact that Lipscomb's entire career was devoted to opposing a change movement in his day that is virtually identical to that of which Allen is a part. One wonders if his reason for featuring Lipscomb is to seek some respectability for his cause.

* Chapter 15 is devoted to Benjamin Franklin, the preacher and editor of the American Christian Review. He objected to the costly and ornate buildings of some of the city churches of the mid-nineteenth century.

The opening quote from Franklin is an indictment of the movement Allen would promote. "A mighty torrent of worldliness is now perverting and corrupting the pure and holy worship prescribed and authorized by our Lord Jesus Christ...This worldly carnal display will send grief home to many hearts of the old saints. Many thousands now living will grieve" (p. 108).

* In chapter 16 he finds an encouraging word for the historians of the change movement who argue that even in their darkest days of apostasy, the Roman Catholic Church and her Protestant daughters were still God's church. Hinsdale wrote, "Despite the 'fearful apostasies' across the centuries," the great body of the Historic church has preserved the central facts, commands and promises of the Gospel" (p. 122).

* Chapter 17 is devoted to 19th century women who were demanding right to preach the gospel. He finds one example within the fellowship of our brethren and alludes to others without explaining that they were principally among the digressive Disciples of Christ and Christian Churches. His description of Silena Moore Holman's campaign is revealing. "She boldly challenged some of the traditional assumptions..." (p. 127). She developed "her views with considerable skill and verve...she affirmed here commitment to biblical authority." His description David Lipscomb's response is predictable. "Lipscomb's responses were usually sharp, sometimes patronizing, and occasionally marked by exasperation. Her responses to him...were firm, carefully reasoned, and respectful" (p. 129). He thinks had Allen been there at the time he would gladly have ordained her to the ministerial office.

* Chapter 19 is devoted to the saintly James A. Harding. While the apparent focus is on his child-like trust in Divine Providence, the author wants us to know that good brother believed there would be a "millennial reign" of Christ on earth (p. 150). Those familiar with our history know that many of our early leaders had murky ideas about millennialism. But it was not an issue to be dealt with in their day. When it became such, good men went to the Bible to see just what its message was about the reign of Christ. All but a tiny handful concluded it was a spiritual reign of the Christian age and that his kingdom was his church. They rightly rejected premillennialism. But our change agents think they were wrong in so doing.

* Chapter 20 is devoted to T. B. Larimore who declared, "I propose never to stand identified with one special wing, branch, or party of the church..." (p. 153) Bro. Larimore is treated like the patron saint of the change movement. In a meeting lasting 22 weeks, "Larimore never mentioned the divisive organ issue." "Larimore simply never addressed the doctrinal issues dividing the movement." "Never... had he furnished any evidence that he was either for or against the organ or the missionary society" (p. 157). This is a major objective of their agenda. They want to convince our brethren to follow Larimore's example so they can proceed in their plans to change the faith, worship and practice of the church without hindrance. In his defense, it is noteworthy that Bro. Larimore did take his stand with those who rejected the instrument and the societies. Although not a warrior, he was not without conviction.

* Chapter 21 is devoted to Bro. K. C. Moser who first articulated the idea of "We need the man (Jesus) not the plan." This was adopted and used as one of the opening shots of the proto-change agents back in the 1960s. He paints Bro. Moser as a martyr who suffered great abuse at the hands of heartless traditionalists. As all change agents tend to do, he introduces Bro. G. C. Brewer and assures his readers that "Brewer...stand(s) directly behind some of the theological shifts occurring among contemporary Churches of Christ." (p. 169). Such name-dropping is trading on the credentials of biblical scholarship and reputation for soundness of Bro. Brewer. His published works, especially his "As Touching those Who Were Once Enlightened and His Medley on the Music Question forever demolishes any claim our current change agents might make on his good name.

The author of this book is a man with an agenda. The contents reveal the scraps of information he has gathered and cobbled together in support of his ideas and his plans for the church. JHW