

A Scrap of History

W. W. OTEY

Little things are usually regarded as of no importance. Yet all great things and great movements, good or bad, have grown from very small "trends," unnoticed by the multitude. The beginning of the kingdom of heaven was compared by the Lord to a grain of mustard seed. From a truth, stated in a single sentence—that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God—the kingdom began and has grown for nineteen hundred years, and will increase and overcome all opposition till time shall cease to be.

The Roman Catholic Church, the greatest and most corrupt ecclesiasticism of all time, began as an apparently innocent "trend"—the idea that one elder in a congregation should be the "presiding elder"; in modern times, "chairman of the board" of elders. Who but the Lord could have foreseen that it would develop into "the man of sin," the pope of Rome? The idea was a seed error, a little "trend" away from the spirit and teaching of the word of the Lord. Plant a seed, and it will produce after its kind.

Is there an example in recorded history when a fundamental "trend" from the word of God has ever been stopped and rooted up, or that failed to mature into apostasy?

The last great apostasy in the Restorative Movement began in little "trends" called "expedients." At first these "trends" were such little deviations from the New Testament model that they were discerned by few and denied by the great majority. A few vigorously opposed them. But their efforts were as futile as defying the incoming tide. During the lifetime of some men they grew into maturity in the establishing of a denomination, the Christian Church.

That the church is now passing through a transition in becoming adjusted to the complex, highly-organized social age is recognized by a number of educators of the highest rank, as well as many close students of the word of God and of history.

The activities of the churches in spreading the gospel into new fields, at home and in foreign lands, is little short of amazing. More money is given, more preachers are sent forth and supported by congregations, than at any time since the Restoration Movement began more than a hundred years ago. Nothing ever accomplished by the churches that formed and worked through humanly-formed organizations can be compared with the success now being achieved by working according to the plan of the New Testament.

While this success should cause great joy, we must not forget that departures from the divine model always creep in when dazzling success dims the vision of the masses and ambitious men unite the church with humanly-formed organizations. The gospel way has always been simple, not organized and complex. From the first any time since the Restorative Movement began more been an element of danger to the autonomy of the simple congregation of the church of the Lord. And such will be true to the end.

Ambitious men propose and undertake religious, or semireligious, complex, and great organizations, requiring large sums of money, which cannot be fitted into the congregational independence of the churches of the Lord. Big things are proposed and performed, denominational "plans and successes" are cited to inspire to liberality. The simplicity of the church of the Lord is not a suitable instrument for entering upon a centralized undertaking of such magnitude. Great centralized associations are unknown to the ancient order of things. "In their con-

gregational capacity alone they moved." God's wisdom decreed that his work should be done by individuals and the congregations. Any religious organization different from, or larger than, a congregation has always led to apostasy. In indisputable fact, to the extent the church joins itself to or operates through any human organization, to that extent it is apostasy.

A brief statement of the growth of such small organizations during the active period of the work of the writer may be of interest and possibly profit to younger men who have not had the benefit of such personal observations and are not very familiar with the history of the growth and results of attaching such organizations to the church.

Fifty-eight years ago, the writer, as an observer, attended the New River District Convention (then called cooperation meetings) at Radford, Va. Perhaps not more than ten or twelve congregations were represented by "delegates." The assembly was so loosely bound together that it really could scarcely be called an organization. A few venerable men, probably not more than a dozen, held council together, added up the amount promised from the few congregations, selected a man to preach in new places and where the membership was weak. As stated, I was only an observer. Comparatively few preachers and writers had at that time challenged the scripturalness of such organizations. The few who did so were denounced, charged with opposing missionary work, faultfinders, and other like unhandsome names.

Such meetings were called "cooperations." The name "convention" came into general use later. Perhaps no departures from the divine model ever looked less harmful. All that was proposed was the greatest work committed to men—that of preaching the gospel. The whole scheme was so plausible that it deceived the hearts of multitudes of those who sincerely wanted to be loyal to the word of the Lord.

The number of different societies multiplied till I think they had six or eight. Then a movement began among the digressives to consolidate them all into one big, strong organization, the United Society. Errett, the Christian Standard, and a considerable number of the older men, and who had been the very pillars in advancing the separate societies, opposed the move to consolidate.

In 1908 the writer met J. B. Briney in a four days' debate in Louisville, Ky. Briney affirmed: "Such organizations as the Illinois Christian Missionary Society and the Foreign Missionary Society are authorized in the New Testament." His defense was one of the most sincere and powerful ever made in behalf of such organizations.

Two years and one month later—October, 1910—I attended the "International Convention of the Disciples Church," generally called "Christian Church." By that time the movement to unite all their societies in one authoritative organization had reached a climax. The feeling on both sides was extremely intense. It seemed that both sides realized that this was the crucial battle. But, as is always true, the "progressives" had been skillfully boring in till the organization machinery was in their hands. The leader, the skilled tactician, Peter Ainsley, of Baltimore, was in the chair, and R. A. Long, the Kansas City millionaire, who poured out his money and was the power to aid the movement, sat on the platform.

Because of the intense interest in the effort to consolidate, both advocates and opposers were present, lined up for an expected battle. J. B. Briney and a number of

(Continued on page 611)

A Scrap of History

(Concluded from page 607)

others, possibly twenty, of the old guard sat close in front of the platform, ready to make a masterful fight for their position. They felt as deeply that what Ainsley and Long were so ardently trying to do was unscriptural as we now think any union with the church and a human organization is unscriptural. Little did those men think when they were nursing the infant societies years before that they would live to see the day they would be powerless to stop their encroachment on the church.

Ainsley stood erect, grim-faced, apparently confident that he manipulated the strings to secure the passage of the resolution to unite all such organizations. It certainly marked a tense time, and very likely the greatest crisis in the movement of the Christian Church to a fully-matured denomination. Briney was the leader and intended spokesman for the opposition. I think it was three times that he sprang to his feet, a mighty warrior, striking personality, and a man of unquestioned influence and power. In vain he sought to gain permission to make a speech in opposition to the uniting of the societies. But his long and faithful defense of the societies as separate institutions meant nothing to the men who were now in the seat of authority. His repeated efforts to gain recognition from Ainsley were treated with seeming contempt. It would be hard to find a case of greater ingratitude and unfairness in the deliberations of men. There was J. B. Briney, Sweeney, and a number of other venerable men—men who had spent a half century in promoting and supporting societies—pleading for a few minutes to present their side of the question, but ungraciously denied that small favor for all their years of labor.

It is now nearly thirty-seven years since that epochal day. But till this hour the expression of tragic defeat on the face of J. B. Briney remains indelibly impressed on my memory. In writing of the scene later, I could think of nothing else that so fittingly described the futility of the effort than a boy rushing out on the beach and tossing his cap to stop the inrushing tide.

From that day till the day of his death Briney opposed the United Society, which was only the merging of the organizations that he so courageously affirmed two years before were "authorized in the New Testament." And the Christian Standard has opposed the United Society till this day. Yet it is only the finished work of its own labors for a half century.

→ A tiny seed of human organization in the church was planted in 1849. The name of the aged Campbell, though not present, and I think never attended one of its meetings, was written as president. The Christian Standard, with Errett, Briney, and other leading men, cultivated, watered, and tended the tiny plant for many years. But they saw it grow throughout the majority of congregations and mature into a mighty ecclesiasticism called the "United Society of the Christian Church." In grief they lived to view the finished work of their own hands.

In view of this so recent an example of apostasy, shall the churches of the Lord again open the Lord's treasury to support human organizations? If so, men now living who advocate or apologize for the practice will live to see the day of fruitless repentance when the little "trend" has gotten beyond their control, like it did in the past as recorded in this writing. So long as God's irrevocable law remains that "every seed shall bring forth after its kind," so long will uniting the church to human organizations mature in apostasy.