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# CHURCH HISTORY

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“Now these things took place as examples for...”

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Lesson 21

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## Formation of the American Christian Missionary Society

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Called by Alexander Campbell, the initial organizational meeting took place on Oct. 24, 1849 in Cincinnati, OH. 156 representatives from churches met for 4 days. The Society was formed to supervise the preaching of the Gospel in America and abroad. A \$10 fee was charged to send a delegate. Larger sums gave greater recognition and position in the Society. Upon formation it had a president (Campbell), 22 vice-presidents, a treasurer, corresponding secretary, recording secretary, and 25 managers. A board, composed of the officers and life directors, was empowered to conduct business. It appointed all agents and missionaries, fixed their salaries, and selected their particular fields of labor. It also recommended that, in all areas, district and statewide meetings be formed or continued. Each church should send annual census reports to be forwarded to the Convention.

## Division in the Movement

As the Restoration Movement grows, so do issues that will divide it. We have already discussed the problems created by the issues of slavery and pacifism, brought on by the Civil War. But two other issues arise. One relates to church organization. The other involves public worship. Both involve differing views on biblical authority.

### The American Christian Missionary Society

Local church autonomy was a founding principle of the Restoration Movement, based on the example of the New Testament church. No organizational ties are found between first century churches. The relationships that existed had nothing to do with organizational ties between them. They shared a common faith and cared about one another. The apostles moved among the churches and related what others were doing. But each church autonomous and independent.

But it did not take long before Restoration churches desired to cooperate to “accomplish a greater good.” It began with area-wide cooperative meetings to plan evangelism. Soon there were some statewide cooperatives that made decisions related to evangelism, selection of evangelists and support for them. Local congregations could still make their own plans in these areas.

### Alexander Campbell's Changing Views

Early in the Restoration Movement, Alexander Campbell opposed all para-church organizations regarding them as detrimental to the church. However, it would appear that his opposition was rooted more in the abuses of these societies and not in their ties to local churches. He opposed them in his first journal, *The Christian Baptist*. But it is not long before he begins to advocate churches cooperate in evangelism.

Later, in 1831, Campbell published in *The Christian Baptist* a series of five articles (two authored by Walter Scott) on church cooperation. In them he argued, just as a local church can do what a single Christian cannot do, a group of churches should work together to accomplish what one church alone cannot do. He was opposed by several and little more was said by him for a

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## Reformation Quotes on Instrumental Music

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The Reformation left the Catholic and Anglican uses of instruments in worship behind. The Reformers saw them as part of the pomp and show of high church worship and detrimental to the renewed New Testament form of congregational participation in worship.

Martin Luther: "The organ in the worship of God is an ensign of Baal. The Roman Catholic borrowed it from the Jews."

John Calvin: "Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law... Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostles is far more pleasing to Him."

John Wesley: "I have no opposition to the organ in our chapel provided it is neither seen nor heard."

decade. Earl West writes that by 1841, "Campbell was thoroughly convinced that the brethren were not taking full advantage of the opportunities and therefore, better organization was needed." Campbell's thinking agreed with others who continued to defend church associations as "helpful" in doing many things. Among them was "to bring the small means of individual congregations together, and to accomplish with these united means what no one congregation could effect." This rationale led Campbell to establish a church-wide organization named The American Christian Missionary Society. The Society was a separate organization from the churches and operated independently.

The Society played a major role in splitting the Restoration movement into two main groups - one favoring church-wide cooperation and institutions, and the other opposed to such forms of cooperation and their resulting institutions. Though widely accepted, or at least tolerated, there *was* widespread objection to its charging a fee for membership. Taking stances on political issues, especially favoring the northern cause in the Civil War, would add to its divisive effect.

### What is the Organization of the Universal Church

Though Campbell and others of his time fought fiercely for congregational independence, it appears they still had a view of a universal church comprised of congregations, not individuals - a critical misunderstanding of church organization. Though they strenuously objected to hierarchical structure and authority, they believed churches could unite voluntarily to accomplish larger works. Churches could (and eventually would) establish organizations that appointed their own officers, selected missionaries and fields of endeavor, and solicited funds to support the missionaries and the administrative costs of the organization.

Such thinking admits the proposition that the organization of the church revealed in the New Testament is insufficient to carry out the Great Commission. It implies, if Paul had been wise enough to set up an evangelistic society to direct "world missions" the first century church could have accomplished so much more.

The Society came to be strongly opposed by many leading figures including Jacob Creath, P. S. Fall, Tolbert Fanning and Benjamin Franklin. Though other issues were involved in the eventual split (especially instrumental music), the issue of church organization lay at the heart of the division. The charge against the Society supporters was they were not following the simple organization found in the New Testament. They were abandoning apostolic authority. Those who favored the society justified it by saying evangelism was a church-wide responsibility and the New Testament had left open how it should be accomplished -

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## Denominational Use of Instrumental Music in the 1800's

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Though roundly rejected by the Reformation leaders and churches, the use of musical instruments became common by the late 19th century. An interesting quote from the time comes from John Spencer Curwen, member of the Royal Academy of Music and president (in 1881) of the Tonic Sol-fa College. He wrote:

*"Men still living can remember the time when organs were very seldom found outside the Church of England. The Methodist, Independents and Baptists rarely had them, and by the Presbyterians they were stoutly opposed. But since these bodies began to introduce organs, the adoption of them has been unchecked. Even the Presbyterians are giving away (sic), and if we read the future by the past, we can hardly doubt that, in a few years, unaccompanied singing will very seldom be heard. Yet even in the Church of England itself, organs did not obtain admission without much controversy."* - Studies in Worship Music. p. 179. Quoted in Instrumental Music in Worship by M. C. Kurfees; p. 146.

essentially the same argument for church polity made by Luther centuries earlier. Churches would eventually divide between those tied to the Society and those who were not. Thus, the extra-biblical organization exerts unwarranted influence over local churches, leading them to think of themselves as a *side* or a *team* of churches.

This is the consequence of thinking the church universal is made up of churches and not individuals. If one thinks of the universal church made up of organized local churches, it is easy to think of them as a team that could do things together. If one understands the church universal is composed of individuals, there is no organization to unite because there is no organization to it all. That is a foundation principle of church autonomy and must be practiced to maintain such autonomy.

### Instrumental Music

The other issue that would split the movement involved using musical instruments in the public worship. The using of instruments in worship is a relatively new innovation in Christendom. Historians acknowledge its absence in the New Testament church as well as for centuries afterward. There is a record of an organ being donated to the pope in the 7<sup>th</sup> century but even it was opposed. The Greek Orthodox church that separated from Rome in the 11<sup>th</sup> century has never used instruments. In the Reformation, Martin Luther and all the leaders were opposed to instrumental music. It will be another 250 years before instrumental music becomes common in the denominations. By the 1850's most were using it.

### Changing Views in the Movement

In the beginning, churches of the Restoration Movement all opposed its use. However, by 1850 there was great pressure to introduce it "to improve our singing." It is not hard to see its use in the denominational churches effected the thinking of many Christians. In 1851 Alexander Campbell blasted the idea with his statement "...to all spiritually-minded Christians such aids would be as a cow bell in a concert."

The first recorded use of an instrument in worship was in 1859 when a melodeon was used at the church in Midway, KY. Franklin, Creath, Lard, McGarvey, and many others opposed its use. It does not become a widespread practice until after the Civil War.

The defense of instrumental music in worship further illustrates diverging ideas on biblical authority. Those supporting its use said the scriptures do not expressly forbid its use. Again, as with the Missionary Society, a defense was made on an argument that the silence of the scriptures allows. The opposition taught what was not expressly revealed in scriptures was unauthorized. Once again, Luther's view of authority is reflected in a departure from the principle that the scriptures are the final authority. This

diverging view will lead to many other differences within the movement. Such a view will always lead to further departures. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the division was complete. In the 1910 census two separate bodies were listed: Churches of Christ, and Disciples of Christ/Christian Church. A third very liberal wing would break with the Christian church and move quickly toward becoming a full-fledged denomination.

### Conclusion

The Restoration ideal of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was not to be realized. Division was perhaps inevitable. Social forces are always at work as well as differing views on biblical authority. And when brethren begin to think in terms larger than the local church (ex., *our* churches vs. *their* churches), divisions crystallize and separation occurs. But each local congregation must be true to its principles, no matter what other congregations may believe and practice.