

The Missionary Society

Introduction:

1. Often, when discussing the division which took place in the early 1900's between the church of Christ and the Christian Church, the issue of instrumental music in worship is emphasized as the divisive issue.
2. While this issue was divisive, there was an earlier and perhaps more divisive issue involved in this tragedy.
3. That issue was the establishment of the Missionary Society...

I. *What Is the Work of the Church?*

- A. The church is a divinely ordained institution (Mt. 16:18; Ac. 20:28).
- B. Thus, it has a divinely ordered function or work.
 1. Benevolence (James 1:27; Acts 2:44-45; 6:1ff; 11:29-30)
 2. Edification (Ephesians 4:11-13)
 3. Evangelism (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-20; etc.)
- C. This is the work which God has commanded the church to do.
- D. Therefore, the church can and must fulfill its God given responsibility.

II. *What Is the Missionary Society?*

- A. In the early 1800's, there was a desire among many congregations of God's people to cooperate with one another in doing the work of the church.
 1. Most of these Christians had come out of denominationalism with its "associations" and yearly "conventions."
 2. Thus, they were hesitant to engage in any practice that resembled such meetings of denominational groups.
 3. However, there was a need for communication and cooperation among faithful brethren.
 4. So, yearly events known as "cooperation meetings" began to take place.
 5. Concerning these meetings, Earl West wrote: "*Cooperations, from all practical intents and purposes, were innocent-looking organizations. They left the churches free and independent. Their resolutions were only recommendations and not laws and legislation. For this reason they found wide acceptance in the brotherhood.*"
- B. Many brethren were willing to set up an organization or institution separate from the church to help the church carry out its function.
 1. At the forefront of this movement for setting up such an institution was Alexander Campbell.
 2. He believed, as did many others, that such an organization was a matter of expediency – simply a way to expedite God's command to preach the Gospel to all the world.
 3. In 1841, Campbell wrote: "*[O]ur organization and discipline are greatly defective, and essentially inadequate to the present condition and wants of Society.*"

- C. This desire for a brotherhood-wide organization would give rise to the establishment of the missionary society.
- D. In 1849, the American Christian Missionary Society was founded in Cincinnati, Ohio.
 - 1. The first president of the ACMS was Alexander Campbell.
 - 2. Article Three of the ACMS constitution stated: *“The Society shall be composed of annual delegates, Life Members and Life Directors. Any church may appoint a delegate for an annual contribution of ten dollars. Twenty dollars paid at one time shall be requisite to constitute a member for life, and one hundred dollars paid at one time, ...shall be required to constitute a director for life.”*
 - 3. The Society was organized with a president, 20 vice-presidents, a treasurer, a corresponding secretary, and a recording secretary.
 - 4. The Society had the power to create agencies to carry out the work of the church.
 - 5. The Society had the power to appoint evangelists or missionaries to certain works and to determine their pay for their efforts.
- E. This Missionary Society was an institution separate from the church of Christ with the goal and design of coordinating evangelistic (and, later, benevolent and other) efforts of the church throughout the world.

III. *What Is Wrong With the Missionary Society?*

- A. It is built upon the false premise that the church is unable to do the work that God ordained it to do.
 - 1. W. K. Pendleton wrote, *“There are some duties of the church which a single congregation cannot, by her unaided strength, discharge.”*
 - 2. God does not command an individual or church to do something that they do not have the power to do!
 - 3. God not only revealed what the work of the church is, but He also revealed how that work can be accomplished – even by church cooperation if necessary.
 - a. 2 Corinthians 11:8-9; Philippians 4:15
 - b. In this scenario, the church is the only institution that is needed to support and oversee evangelistic works.
- B. It supplants the church by doing the work of the church.
 - 1. In 1856, Tolbert Fanning wrote, *“We regard the church of Christ as the only divinely authorized Bible and Missionary Society on earth and furthermore we believe that it is in and by means of the church, the world is to be converted and Christians are to labor for the Lord.”*
 - 2. When the church does the work of evangelism, God’s divine institution receives the glory (Eph. 3:21).
 - 3. When the church does the work of evangelism, the work remains under the oversight of a God-ordained eldership (Titus 1:5; 1 Tim. 5:17).
- C. It undermines the church by dictating to it how it should function.

- D. Its organization is unscriptural. {W. G. Roulhac wrote, “*We move in Kentucky with a steady stride towards a hierarchy as unscriptural as that of Rome or England and the preachers who seek to make themselves the church appear to think all is well.*”}
- E. It exists without authority from God.
 - 1. There is no organization of the church on a universal level revealed in the Bible.
 - 2. There is no authority for the church to create a new institution to do the work God designed the church to do!
- F. It is divisive to unity among congregations of God’s people.
 - 1. The Missionary Society is a “respector of persons” because membership is based on money.
 - 2. Congregations were urged to support only society sanctioned preachers, material, and publications, etc.
 - 3. See James 2:1-9

Conclusion:

- 1. The Missionary Society is an invention of man and without divine authority.
- 2. Those who sought to force it upon the church abandoned any respect for the authority of God’s Word.
- 3. They were responsible for the terrible division that took place among God’s people.
- 4. Sadly, this issue has not gone away but continues to divide the Lord’s church even today.