

Meredith Platt
Week 3 Essay

Did I Step Back into the Therapy Room?

This week's reading was almost a bit of a flashback for me; I had to pause at moments to remember whether I was reading about the Stone-Campbell movement or a case study on a couple coming to therapy. The metaphor of marriage and divorce to describe what was happening in these churches was very real to me in these readings because there were several similarities in how I was perceiving the divisions in the church and how I have worked with distressed couples on the brink of ending their relationship as a marriage therapist.

One of the most noticeable similarities was the tension and hostility between members who disagreed with each other. When unhappy couples attend therapy, one can expect to hear any level of insults, snide remarks, name calling, accusations, blaming, and much more. Couples can be very creative in declaring their disgust for spouses and partners but perhaps the Stone-Campbell leaders were more eloquent in their derision, such as Austin McGary's description of David Lipscomb as "insincere, dissembling, double-dealing, [and] Janus-faced" (*Encyclopedia*, p. 507). These hostilities were expressed by others and towards others, such as Lipscomb's description of the young woman's talk at the GCMC as "a 'rambling talk' on missions that 'lowered the standard of womanly modesty'" (*Global History*, p. 81). Other leaders were not shy in expressing their opinions either, such as Garrison's attacks against Cave which were so brutal and unceasing that Cave eventually resigned his position (*Global History*, p. 85).

Part of the similarity between these interactions and those of bickering couples is that the attacks were not just against another person's actions but against their character and identity; anyone who does x, y, or z must be evil and should be labeled as such. In couples, this misperception is very common; a wife might have a notion that if her husband loved her he would do x, but since he did y or z he clearly never loved her at all. The husband may be well intentioned and have a completely different framework for viewing x and thought y or z better showed love, just like how both groups wanted to be faithful Christians and one group did this by focusing on adherence to positive law and the other on advancing the kingdom of God and neither understood how the other's actions fit into faithfulness. Such misperceptions of the other can perpetuate an innocent victim or self-righteous mindset and put most, if not all, of the blame and responsibility on the other party. John Gottman, a leading researcher on healthy and unhealthy couples, has discovered that one of the biggest predictors of divorce in marriages is the presence of contempt between partners. Contempt is not just dislike for the other person but "any statement or nonverbal behavior that puts oneself on a higher plane than one's partner" (Gottman, p. 45); it is disgust for the other person regardless of what they do and a feeling of superiority for oneself. Based on the remarks between different leaders and emerging groups, it seems contempt was likely present in the Stone-Campbell movement and it would need to have been addressed to prevent divisions from occurring.

Another similarity between divisions and divorce was evident in the Sand Creek "Address and Declaration". The reading of these words in congregations was kind of like the way couples get served with papers when one spouse files for divorce. It can be a very public proclamation of the end. Like divorce filings, the Sand Creek's announcement did not go over well in the larger community, which is not surprising

considering the strong message of the “Address”; “we state that we are impelled from a sense of duty to say...that after being admonished and having had sufficient time for reflection, if they do not turn away from such abominations, that we can not and will not regard them as brethren”. Lipscomb and Harding immediately took to their papers to condemn the proclamation and Garrison “ridiculed the seceders and their leader” (*Global History*, p. 81). Using religious papers and periodicals was as common to those leaders as it is for couples to use Facebook and Twitter today to degrade a spouse and gain sympathy from friends and family while turning them against the spouse. Considering that many of the responses we read from Lipscomb, Harding, Garrison, Sommer, and others were things they were able to craft carefully and dwell on before publication was finished, who knows what these criticisms would have been like if they had the immediacy of social media at their fingertips. It was interesting to me that Sommer even had to get involved as a witness in legal proceedings regarding the actual division of church property, as if this truly was a heated divorce between two spouses (*Encyclopedia*, p. 693). In fact, the legal or government participation of the 1906 Census was a part of what spurred on the major division between Disciples and Churches of Christ.

A common misperception of marriage therapists is that their job is keep couples together. This is not only inaccurate but an impossible task because therapists are not the ones who make decisions for married people. I always told my clients I was going to be on the side of the marriage until they decided the marriage was over and at that point I would switch my focus to helping them work through that difficult transition and have the best relationship they could as not married, especially if they had children together. This is partially because the way break-ups occur can be just as important and life-shaping as the fact that a break-up has occurred. When looking at the break between Disciples and Churches of Christ, the way the break-up occurred was not the same as when Stone and Campbell divided from groups and still considered them brethren. In fact, the Sand Creek “Address and Declaration” said the exact opposite as the “Last Will & Testament”; this time they would not be considered brethren or Christians.

After the 1906 Census, Lipscomb and Garrison went back and forth with blame and accusations. I really wonder what things were like in regular congregations that did not have well-known leaders in them; the Stone and Campbell movements joined as a result of local efforts so how did the confusion and tension play out locally when the main players were not present? For most of the leaders at least, the division was not a pretty one. There were several, such as Larimore and Kershner who refused to choose sides and attempted to work in and among both groups (*Global History*, p. 93). And there were some leaders who apologized later on in life, such as Sommer, which actually led to some cut-off by his own family. But as a whole the movement forgot what brought them together, unity in Christ not in school of thought.

Working with couples is something I will never forget. I know there will be many parallels from being a therapist to being a minister. Pictures of commitment, especially when things are tough and tension is present, are hard to come by both for married people and church people these days.

External Resource:

Gottman, J. M. *The marriage clinic: A scientifically based marital therapy*. New York: Norton, 1999.