

One Way to Promote  
**Church Unity**



**The Rule of Express Terms and the Limits of Fellowship  
in the Stone-Campbell Movement:  
T. W. Brents, A Test Case  
(a Dissertation)**

**Kevin James Gilbert, Ph.D.**

Copyright © 2004 Kevin James Gilbert

All rights reserved. The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has permission to reproduce and disseminate this document in any form by any means for purposes chosen by the Seminary, including, without limitation, preservation or instruction.

THE RULE OF EXPRESS TERMS AND THE LIMITS OF FELLOWSHIP  
IN THE STONE-CAMPBELL MOVEMENT:  
T. W. BRENTS, A TEST CASE

---

A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

---

by  
Kevin James Gilbert

May 2004

## ABSTRACT

### THE RULE OF EXPRESS TERMS AND THE LIMITS OF FELLOWSHIP IN THE STONE-CAMPBELL MOVEMENT: T. W. BRENTS, A TEST CASE

Kevin James Gilbert, Ph.D.  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Chairperson: Dr. Craig A. Blaising

This study argues that a key to continued unity in the Stone-Campbell movement in the face of T. W. Brents's unorthodox doctrine of limited foreknowledge was likely a consistent application of the rule of express terms. It focuses on the nineteenth century figure, T. W. Brents, who was found to have composed the movement's most comprehensive doctrine of limited foreknowledge. He serves as a representative of SCM leaders who confessed the doctrine in contrast with other key personalities who advocated a more classical doctrine.

The rule of express terms is described, as is its development and adoption into the movement as a means to fulfill the movement's agenda for unity. In theory, with particular regard to the boundaries of fellowship, it allowed ultimate spiritual authority to the express (explicit) terms of the Bible alone. It denied all but educational authority to human inferences or opinions. Most significantly, it negated the Reformed doctrine of necessary consequence. The theological history of Brents is sketched, to include factors available to influence the development of his doctrine of limited foreknowledge. Responses to his doctrine, both pro and con, are examined. The historical sources are united by a common thread of silence: no calls for the limitation of fellowship over this doctrine were discovered. Finally, the data are interpreted to demonstrate the likelihood of the thesis. The rule of express terms seems to be a key to continued unity in the movement amid theological diversity regarding the doctrine of divine foreknowledge.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....   | vii  |
| PREFACE .....   | viii |
| <br>Chapter   |      |
| 1. THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED FOREKNOWLEDGE<br>AND CHRISTIAN UNITY ..... | 1    |
| Introduction .....  | 1    |
| Statement of the Problem .....  | 2    |
| Thesis .....  | 5    |
| The Rule of Express Terms .....                                       | 7    |
| Defining the rule .....   | 7    |
| The rule's function .....   | 7    |
| The rule's development .....  | 8    |
| The rule applied .....  | 13   |
| The rule's affinities .....   | 15   |
| Summary of the Rule .....   | 15   |
| Recent Discussion of T. W. Brents .....                               | 16   |
| Sources .....   | 19   |
| 2. BRENTS'S THEOLOGICAL HISTORY .....                                 | 23   |
| Introduction .....  | 23   |
| Brents's Impact: A Movement-Made Superman .....                       | 24   |
| His Innermost Circle .....  | 25   |

| Chapter  | Page |
|--|------|
| His Own Generation .....   | 30   |
| The Next Generation and Beyond .....   | 33   |
| The People's Communicator .....  | 36   |
| <i>The Gospel Plan of Salvation</i> .....                                    | 40   |
| Summarizing Their Superman .....   | 44   |
| Cultural and Theological Influences .....                                    | 45   |
| Formative Cultural Influences .....  | 45   |
| Formative Theological Influences .....                                       | 48   |
| Governing Theological Concerns .....   | 56   |
| Conclusion .....   | 59   |
| 3. BRENTS'S DOCTRINE OF LIMITED FOREKNOWLEDGE .....                          | 60   |
| Brents's Claim of Independent Development .....                              | 62   |
| Potential Influences Outside and Inside<br>the Stone-Campbell Movement ..... | 63   |
| The influence of a visionary ecclesiology .....                              | 64   |
| The influence of conditional soteriology .....                               | 70   |
| The influence of attitudes toward foreknowledge .....                        | 74   |
| Other potential influences .....   | 83   |
| Brents on Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom .....                       | 85   |
| Biblical grounds for rejecting unlimited<br>divine foreknowledge .....       | 94   |
| Philosophical grounds for rejecting unlimited<br>divine foreknowledge .....  | 99   |
| Implications and Conclusions .....   | 102  |
| 4. RESPONSES TO BRENTS'S DOCTRINE OF LIMITED<br>FOREKNOWLEDGE .....          | 104  |
| General Acceptance .....   | 106  |
| Acceptance as the Most Biblical View .....                                   | 115  |

| Chapter  | Page       |
|--|------------|
| Rejection as Biblically Defective .....  | 121        |
| Acceptance as the Most Logical View .....  | 125        |
| Rejection as Logically Defective .....   | 128        |
| Ambiguity Regarding the Doctrine .....   | 134        |
| The Doctrine's Continued Life .....  | 141        |
| Implications and Conclusions .....   | 145        |
| <b>5. INTERPRETING BRENT'S DOCTRINE OF LIMITED<br/>FOREKNOWLEDGE AND ITS FORBEARANCE .....</b> | <b>147</b> |
| Interpreting Brents's Theological Development .....  | 147        |
| Brents's Biblicism .....   | 149        |
| Extrabiblical Influences .....   | 151        |
| Pioneering theology .....  | 151        |
| Exposure to Arminian values .....  | 153        |
| Attitudes toward Inferences .....  | 156        |
| Existing Doctrines of Limited Foreknowledge .....  | 157        |
| Governing Theological Concerns .....   | 158        |
| Blindness in Brents? .....   | 160        |
| Summary of Brents's Theological Development .....  | 161        |
| Maintaining Unity in Theological Diversity .....   | 162        |
| The Rule of Express Terms .....  | 162        |
| The Rule in Theory .....   | 163        |
| The Rule in the SCM's Classical Theists .....  | 167        |
| The Rule in Brents .....   | 170        |
| Conclusion .....   | 171        |
| <b>Appendix</b>  |            |
| <b>A CHRONOLOGICAL OUTLINE OF BRENTS'S LIFE .....</b>  | <b>174</b> |
| <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>  | <b>178</b> |

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| <i>BF</i>   | <i>The Works of Benjamin Franklin</i> (CD-ROM)                           |
| <i>BWS</i>  | <i>The Works of Barton W. Stone</i> (CD-ROM)                             |
| <i>CSR</i>  | <i>Christian Scholars' Review</i>  |
| <i>EDT</i>  | <i>Evangelical Dictionary of Theology</i>                                |
| <i>GA</i>   | <i>Gospel Advocate</i>   |
| <i>GPS</i>  | T. W. Brents, <i>The Gospel Plan of Salvation</i> , 17 <sup>th</sup> ed. |
| <i>JETS</i> | <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>                    |
| <i>JWM</i>  | <i>The Works of J. W. McGarvey</i> (CD-ROM)                              |
| <i>MEL</i>  | <i>The Works of Moses E. Lard</i> (CD-ROM)                               |
| <i>MH</i>   | <i>Millennial Harbinger</i> (CD-ROM)                                     |
| <i>RQ</i>   | <i>Restoration Quarterly</i>   |
| <i>SCM</i>  | The Stone-Campbell Movement  |
| <i>WAC</i>  | <i>The Works of Alexander Campbell</i> (CD-ROM)                          |



CHAPTER 1  
THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED FOREKNOWLEDGE  
AND CHRISTIAN UNITY

**Introduction**

Since the early nineteenth century, the Stone-Campbell movement (SCM) has included Christians who believed that God's foreknowledge was limited, as well as those who believed that God's foreknowledge was absolute. As such, the history of the SCM provides one example of a fellowship whose people held different views of foreknowledge and remained united. This study sought the fundamental reason that unity was maintained. Today, several significant Christian fellowships wrestle with the same challenges. Because those who believe that God does not know some future things are arguably unorthodox, the orthodox who believe God has absolute foreknowledge search for adequate responses. Often, they consider excluding the unorthodox from their communities of faith in some way. These contemporary challenges and a divinely-sanctioned concern for Christian unity served as the initial impetus for this research. The historical example of the SCM may hold some contemporary worth for those involved in the dialogue, especially for those who value historical precedent. T. W. Brents developed the SCM's most comprehensive doctrine of limited foreknowledge, so, the study focused on him as the key representative of a larger number of SCM adherents who also held the doctrine.

### Statement of the Problem

Today, many evangelicals agree that the doctrine of limited foreknowledge “must not be accepted within evangelicalism.”<sup>1</sup> A significant, vocal number of Christian academics, authors, and pastors have lobbied for the exclusion of people who hold this “novel understanding of God” from their faith-communities.<sup>2</sup> Some of that lobbying has not been entirely successful. The Baptist General Conference, for example, has energetically discussed the question. It concluded that the doctrine fits within the boundaries of its historic confession. Men, like Gregory Boyd, who hold the doctrine, continue to be employed in its seminaries. However, because it is historically committed to certain levels of Christian liberty and congregational autonomy, it also concluded to leave ministerial ordination in the hands of its regional conferences. At last count, approximately half of the regions had decided to exclude from ministerial ordination any who confess this doctrine, for they believe the doctrine of limited foreknowledge transgresses the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup>

Other groups have succeeded in modifying their confessions. In 2000, the Southern Baptist Convention approved a rewritten article on God for its summary of beliefs, the Baptist Faith and Message. The new article more clearly reflects the classical doctrine of absolute foreknowledge. While questions of church membership are left in the hands of its autonomous congregations (as its polity is understood by this author), a person must agree with the denomination’s confession in order to hold a denominational

---

<sup>1</sup>Bruce A. Ware, review of *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*, by John Sanders, *JETS* 43, no. 2 (2000): 342; John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997).

<sup>2</sup>Ronald Ross Layne, Jr., “Exodus 32:7-14 in Richard Rice’s Argument for the Openness of God” (Th.M. thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1998), 2.

<sup>3</sup>See Baptist General Conference documents [on-line]; accessed 6 March 2001; available from <http://www.bgcworld.org/4know>; Internet.

office—e.g., one who confesses a doctrine of limited foreknowledge would be excluded from the faculty of its seminaries.<sup>4</sup>

Still, other groups continue the discussion. In the Evangelical Theological Society, the level of dialogue has increased over the past few years. In 2001, the Society's fifty-third annual meeting was devoted to the theme of "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries," and the discussion of whether or not the doctrine of limited foreknowledge fit within those boundaries became the focus.<sup>5</sup> Many want the Society's doctrinal statement redrawn to exclude such doctrines of divine self-limitation. The conversation continues in the Society's journal.<sup>6</sup> Further, at its annual meeting in 2003, the Society considered removing two full members on the premise that their doctrine of limited foreknowledge implicitly violates the inerrancy clause in the Society's doctrinal basis.<sup>7</sup> These are only a few examples of a dialogue which permeates evangelicalism in America.

The dispute has focused primarily on the affirmation that God reveals himself in Scripture as possessing limited foreknowledge, not the absolute foreknowledge that has been accepted as orthodoxy. Opponents of the doctrine of limited foreknowledge deny that it is congruent with Scripture and that it coheres logically. Others have called for the exclusion of those who hold the doctrine on historical grounds, arguing that it is an

---

<sup>4</sup>See Southern Baptist Theological Seminary publications [on-line]; accessed 6 March 2001; available from <http://www.sbts.edu/webelieve.html> and <http://www.sbts.edu/www/baptfm.html#God>; Internet.

<sup>5</sup>Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Colorado Springs, CO, 14-16 November 2000, and related documents [on-line]; accessed 6 March 2001; available from <http://www.etsjets.org>; Internet.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Ron Highfield, "Divine Self-Limitation in Open Theism," *JETS* 45, no. 2 (2002): 299.

<sup>7</sup>See documents available from The Evangelical Theological Society [on-line]; accessed 25 August 2003; available from <http://www.etsjets.org/members/challenge/2003-challenge.html>; Internet. The measures did not receive enough votes to remove those men from membership.

innovative theology devoid of continuity with the orthodox Christian tradition.<sup>8</sup> This study focuses on a historical question, particularly, the history of interpretation in the SCM. Those participating in this discussion from a historical standpoint, therefore, may exhibit the most interest in this study of the SCM, beginning in the nineteenth-century. It was an evangelical fellowship which addressed the challenge to unity, without division or exclusion, when faced with the problem presented by the unorthodox doctrine of limited foreknowledge.

Division and exclusion were resisted by the SCM from the beginning, and unity was its watchword. This distinctly American, nineteenth-century reform movement took its name from two of its earliest key figures: Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell. They pursued the Christian unity their Lord desired, and they claimed the Bible alone as their means of achieving it. Three distinct contemporary fellowships emerged from the SCM: the Churches of Christ, the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Some of the movement's adherents held a doctrine of limited foreknowledge, while others held a doctrine of absolute foreknowledge; this created a situation which seems very similar to the contemporary dispute.<sup>9</sup> One of the movement's namesakes, Alexander Campbell, confessed a classical understanding of absolute foreknowledge:

Known to God alone is the future destiny of the entire universe, and of every atom of it. To him alone the past, the present and the future of every creature is as fully

---

<sup>8</sup>Geisler uses "neotheism" (Norman Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man: Neotheism's Dangerous Drift* [Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997], passim); Layne uses "novelty" (Ronald Ross Layne, "Exodus 32:7 in Richard Rice's Argument for the Openness of God," 2); Mohler asserts that evangelicalism is "now marked by theological . . . pluralism . . . concerning the doctrine of God," R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "The Eclipse of God at the Century's End: Evangelicals Attempt Theology without Theism," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1, no. 1 [1997]: 9).

<sup>9</sup>Regarding SCM's perception of itself as "evangelical," see, e.g., Thomas Campbell, "A Declaration and Address," in *The Quest for Christian Unity, Peace, and Purity in Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address*, ed. Thomas H. Olbricht and Hans Rollman, ATLA Monograph Series (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2000), 6. See also Alexander Campbell, "Preface" *Millennial Harbinger* 1 (1837): 3, in *Millennial Harbinger* [CD-ROM] (Indianapolis: Faith and Facts, 1996). Cf. Jesse R. Kellems, *Alexander Campbell and the Disciples: Lectures Delivered in Brite College of the Bible, Texas Christian University, April and May, 1925* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1930), 21, 154, in WAC [CD-ROM] (Indianapolis: Faith and Facts, 1997).

known as any present object ever is, or was, or can hereafter be, to us. Foreknown to God alone, and to him whom he inspires, is the future condition of any person or thing, within the entire area of creation. To God alone the past, the present, and the future of every atom in creation is always equally present.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, Campbell had also expressed this position about fifteen years earlier, at roughly the same time he was commending a book by Alexander Hall in which Hall presented a doctrine of limited foreknowledge as necessary to refute Universalism.<sup>11</sup>

The other namesake of the movement, Barton W. Stone, had also held the classical doctrine of absolute foreknowledge at one time. However, he eventually concluded that “the foreknowledge of God” in Scripture was not the absolute knowledge of all future things, it was simply “the knowledge [of future things which God] made known by Moses and the prophets hundreds of years before” they happened.<sup>12</sup> These examples from Stone, Campbell, and Hall point to the earliest coexistence of alternative doctrines of foreknowledge within the SCM in the early 1840's.

Within the SCM, that coexistence-in-tension continued throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, throughout the twentieth, and it continues today. This study seeks specifically to discover a reason the SCM remained unified in spite of their differences on the doctrine of divine foreknowledge, while other fellowships sought to exclude Christians for such unorthodox teaching.

## **Thesis**

T. W. Brents, a major theological figure in the nineteenth century SCM, advocated a doctrine of limited foreknowledge. Although Brents was opposed by

---

<sup>10</sup>A. Campbell, “Prophecy, No. 4” *MH* 4, no. 1 (1861): 18-19.

<sup>11</sup>See chapter 3 for the details of Hall’s doctrine of limited foreknowledge. Hall published his doctrine at about the same time Campbell expressed his classical doctrine, and within months of Hall’s publication, Campbell had reviewed and commended it. Alexander Hall, *Universalism Against Itself* (St. Clairsville, OH: Heaton and Gressinger, 1846); A. Campbell, “Calvinism and Arminianism,” *MH* 3, no. 6 (1846): 325; the review of Hall was in T. M. Allen and A. Campbell, “New Publication,” *MH* 4, no. 2 (1847): 120.

<sup>12</sup>B. W. Stone, “The Christian Expositor,” *Christian Messenger* 12, no. 6 (1842):171, in *BWS* [CD-ROM] (Indianapolis: Faith and Facts, 1996); this is notably similar in Franklin below.

classical theists in the SCM, the issue of divine foreknowledge did not become a cause of division. This dissertation will argue that a probable reason why it did not lead to schism was that both sides subjected the issue to the rule of express terms.

Brents was not the only one who held this doctrine; he is used here as a representative of those who held the doctrine because he articulated it most thoroughly in print. The movement possessed other prominent preachers, elders, and academics who published their agreement with Brents's position. For example, among them were R. B. Trimble, J. M. Kidwell, W. C. Huffman, Washington Bacon, W. D. Carnes—President of Burritt College (a role Brents would occupy after him)—and Jacob Creath, Jr.<sup>13</sup> Creath, for example, said of Brents's view, "I arrive at the same conclusion as our talented brother on every topic."<sup>14</sup> However, these men did not systematically articulate their views on the subject in print as Brents did in his tracts, the *Gospel Advocate*, and primarily in his book, *The Gospel Plan of Salvation*.<sup>15</sup> While Alexander Hall, prior to Brents, had expressed similar views in his book, *Universalism Against Itself*, he did so much less systematically, thoroughly, and coherently than did Brents, making Hall's work far less accessible.<sup>16</sup> While Brents professed the problematic doctrine at the center of this study, the rule of express terms seems to have been a significant reason for the SCM's forbearance of him and his doctrine.

---

<sup>13</sup>Although the source does not note it, this must be Jacob Creath, Jr., for his uncle and co-laborer with him in the SCM, Jacob Creath, Sr., had died March 14, 1854, two months after Thomas Campbell died, and some twenty years before the publication of Brents's *GPS*. Cf. Robert Richardson, *The Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* vol. 2 (n.p.: WV, 1898), 606, in *WAC*.

<sup>14</sup>T. W. Brents, *The Gospel Plan of Salvation*, 17<sup>th</sup> ed. [*GPS*] (reprint, Bowling Green, KY: Guardian of Truth Foundation, 1987), 537-39. It was first published in Cincinnati: Bosworth, Chase, and Hall, 1874.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, chapters 1-5.

<sup>16</sup>Hall, *Universalism Against Itself*.

## The Rule of Express Terms

For the SCM historian, the language of “express statement,” “express terms,” “approved precedent,” and the like would be immediately recognized and understood. These are phrases which have appeared in SCM literature from the beginning, and which continue to be discussed, appropriately, under the rubric of hermeneutics. However, the rule of express terms (the rule) was more than an interpretive guideline; it was the touchstone of a method which reached into multiple areas of practical theology to achieve Christian unity.

**Defining the rule.** Applied to the Bible, the adjective phrase *express terms*, by definition, referred to . . . .

to access this entire book, send \$15.95 via the Credit/Debit Card or PayPal buttons located at <https://gilgilbert.net/services> (ensure you type "Dissertation" in the notes box & include your name & email address). I will email you an access code and instructions.