

Restoring Movement to the Restoration Movement

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I. What Do We Mean Restoring movement?

My father remembers the time he and other young men took their turn at digging graves for family and friends in the community. Gilgal cemetery in Lawrence County, Indiana is one of the oldest cemeteries in the state. Because the plots were uncharted and older graves unmarked, workers would often find themselves digging at existing graves and have to start over. More than once they accidentally broke through hundred-year-old coffins, and now and again they saw something that made their blood run cold: bodies contorted in ways that proved they had been buried alive, a not uncommon accident in frontier America.

In the brotherhood-wide concern for the condition of restorationism, let us be careful that we don't operate from the assumption that the Stone-Campbell Movement is dead. The old girl may be a pale and wobbly in places and forgotten by many of her children, but she is very much alive. Some in the brotherhood have declared her dead and are digging the grave so they can do one of two things: (1) Drop the heavy obligation of restoration and move on into the easy world of interdenominationalism, or (2) resurrect the Movement after their own model, i.e., ecumenical unity.

Do not misunderstand our theme. We are not standing outside a tomb calling forth a dead Lazarus; rather we find ourselves doing what the Church has always had to do: the work of repentance and revival. We must not act as if some strange thing were happening to us. And we must not panic, as if the Movement were breathing its last and any kind of resuscitation is better than nothing. If the Movement is sick, let us take care that we do not finish it off with our remedies. It was said of the ancient Romans, "They made a desolation and called it peace." Let it not be said of this generation of the Movement, "They went off in a frenzy and called it progress." Which is to say that after we have decided to restore movement to the Movement, we must then give a care as to what kind of movement and in what direction.

II. To Restore Movement, We Must Throw Off the Intimidation of Denominational Variety.

It's tough, this business of standing on the authority of Scripture and holding for the Ancient Order when so many dynamic believers express their faith in so many antisciptural religious systems. The nineteenth-century restorationists faced the old mainline protestant denominations and a few cults; twentieth-century restorationists face those, plus a thousand more sects and subdivisions of sects; we're in a cult-of-the-month club these days; then there's the radio and TV prophets and the multiplication of electronic churches. And every time we open our mail we find a new parachurch outfit setting up shop on the outskirts of the Kingdom (under the direct mandate of the Spirit, of course).

If we do not think clearly, the mere number of alternatives to New Testament Christianity will subtly drain away our confidence. The spectacle of so many denominations, sects, and cults intimidates the popular mind--religious and secular--in one of two directions: (1) Unlimited variation is taken as proof that none of it is true, or (2) the spiritual vitality of the sects persuades many that all of them

are, in some way at least, the work of God. Restoration Movement people often are embarrassed to insist on a biblical model for the church when so many sincere believers vote for something else.

At the Leipzig Debate (July 1519) the Roman Catholic scholar Eck disturbed Martin Luther with the question, "Except for you is all the Church in error?" Eck operated from the medieval assumption that it was impossible for one man to be right if he rejected the tradition of the Church, i.e., that which had been believed for so long by so many. Luther had to think it over. Before he could decide that his theology was the right one, he had to convince himself that it was possible for it to be so.

Many in the Movement have succumbed to a kind of medieval intellectual pressure. Brotherhood leaders raise the questions: "Who do we think we are? Do we alone teach God's plan of salvation? Look at that body of believers over there; see how they love Jesus! How can we be so arrogant to say that they must submit to what we call the New Testament Order!" Humble folk are often stampeded into a apologizing for the Restoration Plea, unconsciously assuming along with the questioner that the mere breadth of denominational variety makes it impossible that the Restoration Movement, outnumbered as it is, could represent apostolic Christianity to this generation. Like Luther, we must first decide whether it is possible for us to be right in the face of multiplied alternatives. If the Church stands on the apostolic-prophetic word and on nothing else, then the plea of the Restoration Movement is possible and reasonable. If the Church stands on modern human testimony of immediate Spirit-guidance, then our position is indefensible--the Plea could not be true.

At the Diet of Worms (April 1521) Luther again faced the issue. Eck announced that Luther could not say that the Church, speaking through traditions and councils, was wrong and this one man right. He then called upon Luther to repudiate his writings. Luther replied that he could not recant unless convicted by Scripture and plain reason. He had the right of it, and there we must stand. If we surrender any part of the Restoration Plea, let it be because it has been disproved by Scripture and plain reason, not because so many believe otherwise. Doctrine stands on hermeneutics, not on mathematics. If I'm wrong and narrow and legalistic and divisive, show me in Scripture; don't tell me how many spiritual people disagree with me.

III. To Restore Movement, We Must Keep Our Feet Planted on the Solid Rock of the Inerrant Bible.

The Restoration Plea assumes the inerrancy of Scripture. Deny inerrancy and the Plea disintegrates. The Church rests upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). Christians are those who have been regenerated by the word of God (I Peter 1:23). I know of no way of understanding this unless the Church stands on the Spirit-inspired apostolic-prophetic word, originally in spoken form, now in its accredited written form, the New Testament.

The Movement faces no more deadly threat than the denial of inerrancy. The inerrancy debate is not over terminology, the mode of inspiration, hermeneutics, translations or copies, problem texts, or artificial precision in language. Inerrantists are not Calvinistic Fundamentalists; we are not motivated by institutional jealousy; we are not interested in party-building; while some of us make inerrancy a test of leadership, none of us make it a test of fellowship, contrary to false accusation.

What, then, is this inerrancy business all about? It is about the character of the Bible--what kind of Book it is, and it is about the connection between Scripture and faith, between Scripture and the Church.

I am beginning to hear from men who are trying for a mediating position—neither inerrantists nor errantists; these are church leaders who refuse to be counted for inerrancy, but neither do they want to

be heard saying that parts of the Bible are not true. But it won't work, and these fellows don't understand the issues. Inerrancy is not a semantical spat among professors, all of whom believe the Bible, but some of whom simply have unanswered questions about the text.

Anti-inerrancy comes in a package. Those leading the fight against an inerrant Bible--the conservative and not-so-conservative Disciples among us--are not, as many believe, operating within the context of traditional true-to-the-Bible restorationism. They are not, I repeat not, conservative scholars who are being ignorantly and unfairly persecuted because they dare to be super-honest about problem texts. The leading anti-inerrancy scholars in our brotherhood are men who continue to move within the academic tradition of old liberal Disciplesdom, i.e., they use the historical-critical method to sift Scripture and identify those parts that are the Word of God and, therefore, binding on the Church. Through them the spirit of Tübingen continues to haunt the Movement. They deny inerrancy because they use neo-orthodox categories of Inspiration, Revelation, and Faith. In their classrooms they teach the source theories that undermined the authority of Scripture and brought the movement to a grinding halt earlier in this century.

In a session at the 1986 NACC Myron Taylor attacked inerrancy as a Restoration principle. He built his argument on the radically skeptical epistemology that has always been used by the enemies of the Bible. And who can be surprised that he should do so. Anti-inerrancy is one aspect of a system, and made-in-Germany philosophical agnosticism has always been foundational to that system.

When inerrancy goes the authority of Scripture goes with it. It is not strange that very often it is the anti-inerrancy people who call for women elders in a unisex church, easy divorce, and infinite patience with denominationalism. Have you noticed that errantists often make common cause with the crypto-Baptists among us in the denial that baptism is a condition for salvation?

Errantists have redefined the Bible and redefined the connection between Scripture and Church. Now, of course, they cry out that the Restoration Movement as we have known it must be redefined. They would define it out of existence.

Errantists believe the Bible is "authoritative," except in those parts they judge to be untrue or uninspired. They can, therefore, no longer say that the Bible alone is the authority for faith and practice. They are free to construct a church according to their own preferences, using the New Testament, as a "norm," a guideline; it goes too far (for them) to think of Scripture as pattern or law. If what the Bible says about the Church is not true just because it is in the Bible, there exists no basis for a restoration movement. For this reason I affirm that to restore movement to the Movement, we must keep our feet planted on the solid rock of the inerrant Bible.

IV. To Restore Movement, We Must Clear on What We Mean by Restoration.

Leroy Garrett's *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (College Press, 1981) represents a view of the Movement that is being shared by more of our people every year; it is an interpretation of the Plea that has always been espoused by the conservative Disciples. Garrett believes the Movement has been a huge and horrible mistake. He explains that the Stone-Campbell program was to have been a unity movement from within existing denominations; it betrayed the Declaration and Address when it allowed itself to become a restoration movement made up of congregations existing independent of and doctrinally isolated from those denominational churches.

In his *The Great Awakenings and the Restoration Movement* (College Press, 1983), Max Ward Randall declares that "God's approbation was on the Awakenings of the eighteenth and early

nineteenth centuries” (p. 6). Randall traces the connections between various revivals and the people directly or indirectly connected to the Restoration Movement. The point of Randall's book is that, since the Stone-Campbell Movement has roots in God-directed and Spirit-vivified revivals among many denominational groups, we must today recognize God's approval of many things being taught in denominational churches and repent of our doctrinal isolationism. He rejects the notion that only Restoration churches are true to the Scriptures.

Both of these recent histories are readable and valuable additions to the literature of the Movement. Neither author is trained in historiography. Both were written to make a point, which is not how one is supposed to do history. Both are guilty of special pleading, and they were written to plead the same cause: tearing down the barriers between ourselves and the evangelical-denominational world. Garrett and Randall agree that the key to restoring movement to the Movement is our reentry into the Evangelical mainstream.

Garrett calls on us to reclaim the ecumenical spirit and seek unity with other believers, a unity based on the Lordship of Jesus, not upon doctrine. His demand that we return to the Declaration and Address is historical malpractice. True, the earliest Restoration fathers started with a vision of mild reform from within existing church bodies. When Thomas Campbell wrote the Declaration and Address, he thought that Protestant churches were already united on matters of faith, divided only on matters of deduction and opinion. But the commitment to the authority of Scripture gradually forced the Restorationists to acknowledge, painfully, that the call for unity on the Bible involved matters of faith as well as nonessentials. Reformation became restoration; the movement became a revolution. Fidelity to the principle of the authority of Scripture led the Campbell's into areas of doctrine that Thomas never dreamed of when he wrote the Declaration and Address. Garrett's thesis does not hold.

Randall confuses providence and sociology. His is the fallacy of historicism, i.e., he argues for what is true from what happened. True Restorationism, on the other hand, gets its doctrine from the Bible, not from history.

The Restoration Plea, as progressively hammered out by the founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement, was neither ecumenical nor interdenominational union. But neither was it what too many of their spiritual descendants have made of it: the announcement that all denominational believers are hell-bound apostates. The Restoration Plea, properly understood, makes us preachers of the Word, not keepers of the Book of Life. The pivotal issue was, and should be now, the authority of Scripture. The Restoration fathers, at least most of the early ones, came to understand that men, whether individually or collectively (such as in denominational creeds), have authority to sanction neither any plan of salvation nor any order for the Church other than that taught in the Bible. They reserved for God the privilege of making exceptions to the commands and precedents of Scripture; they did not presume to hold out assurances based on their opinions, inferences, or impulses toward generosity. In the Lunenburg Letters controversy, for example, Alexander Campbell stated that in his opinion it is possible that there are Christians among the denominations, even those that do not practice immersion. He did not, as many accuse him, use his opinion as justification for treating the unimmersed as anything but candidates for the prospect list.

The Movement, as we all know, has suffered unspeakable damage because so many of us have been more than ready to stand strong on the clear commands of Scripture, but less than ready to allow the freedom that the Plea also demands. It takes courage to stand for the Ancient Order when so many are ready to abandon it, but it takes even more courage to allow our brothers liberty in deduction, opinion, and method. Small-mindedness has been and is the scourge of the Movement. Who can deny that most of the division we have sustained, so humiliating for a unity movement, has been over

nonessentials, not over Faith? This certainly has been true of the parts of the Movement that did not join the great Disciple abandonment of biblical Christianity. The plague in most of our local congregations is not apostasy; it is the bigotry of Christians who have only half-learned the Restoration Plea.

Seldom is the denominational believer offended by our message; often is he offended by our manner, or by our unwavering stand on what the Bible almost says and we think should say and concerning which we have graciously filled in the missing revelation. To restore movement to the Movement, we must be clear what we mean by Restoration. It is the plan of salvation and the order of the Church that is to be restored--nothing less. But nothing more! We are not in the business of "restoring" our own narrow notions of what's best for the Church.

V. To Restore Movement, We Must Have a Genuine Revival.

Man being what he is, the world being what it is, there will never be a time when it's not time for revival--the real thing. We hear much talk these days about renewal; usually it's "renewal in the Spirit." We must be careful; we're a generation of the Church that can't always tell the difference between emotional self-indulgence and true worship, between genuine renewal and a warm cuddly feeling. We've had enough ersatz revival, the kind produced by sentimental music, self-conscious pietism, and hand-waving gush-mush. Revival means increased faith, and faith has only one ultimate source--Scripture. We must restore genuine and profound exposition of Scripture in the Church. Other foundation for revival can no man lay. The founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement restored the Bible to the frontier Church. Early Restorationists were known, even by their enemies, as a people enamored of The Book. The average member in our congregations, if he is enamored of anything, it is of his own spiritual inner rumblings; he knows little of The Book.

VI. To Restore Movement, We Must Remember that the Local Church is the Church.

A few years ago I sat in a missions rally and heard the field representative of the European Evangelistic Society announce that the EES people working in Tübingen are "the cutting edge of the Restoration Movement." He was speaking of academic interaction with the scholars at the University there. The EES is not the cutting edge of the Movement. Florida Christian College is not the cutting edge of the Movement, neither is any other college, nor do our educational institutions collectively constitute the cutting edge. The Restoration Movement came into existence to restore apostolic order to the local Church, and only the local Church is the Church, and it is there, and only there, that movement can be restored to the Movement. Regional and national committees, conventions, forums, seminars, and projects are going to have little to do with revitalizing the Movement. It doesn't work like that.

The local Church is the cutting edge of the Movement. Local preachers and elders are the front line; all others are rear echelon. This has been proclaimed the Year of the Leader. Every year is the year of the leader--in the local Church. We will restore movement to the Movement when we raise up a generation of preachers who are willing to pay the price to bring substantive, dynamic, comprehensive, and prayerful Bible scholarship to the pulpit and classroom in the local Church. We will restore movement when we have raised up a generation of elders who are intelligent and courageous leaders, not simply office-holders who think their ministry fulfilled when they've monitored the preacher and served the Lord's Supper. We have many of the right kind of preachers and elders; we must have a hundredfold more.

Men look to projects, plans, and policies to get the job done. We take the ad hoc approach to almost any problem. God, however, starts with men. We must learn the best methods to reach our culture as it is. We must work together when our ministry extends beyond the limits of the local congregation. We must take every opportunity to learn from others. But it always comes back to the man. The Movement falters today because this is an age of small men and too often the pygmies are running the circus. We must once again have giants in the land, or we can forget about restoring movement to the Movement. The strong leader in the local congregation--the strength and hope of the Restoration Movement.

VII. To Restore Movement, We Must Restore the Place of Teaching and Learning in the Local Church.

What is the primary work of the local congregation? Evangelism? Worship? Fellowship? Therapy? Benevolence? Missions? Maintaining the property? None of the above. The first business of the New Testament Church was and must be teaching and learning; all else stands upon this foundation; all else flows from this fountainhead.

Christianity is a taught religion, and people believe what they're taught. The idea of Illumination is Calvinistic nonsense. The Holy Spirit does not filter out the truth from the flood of religious error and impress it upon the minds of people in a process that protects believers from heresy. There is nothing about the Gospel truth that guarantees that it will be better received than false doctrine. Quite the contrary; the Bible says that fallen man is more likely to accept a lie.

False churches grow because dynamic teachers teach the people what is not true. The New Testament Church will grow only when dynamic teachers teach the people what is true.

VIII. To Restore Movement, We Must Move the Church Out of the Building and Onto the Firing Line.

The local congregation is in deep trouble when all that's important about it takes place inside the meeting house (or on the ball field). Christians simply must interact redemptively with the world. The Church is commanded to challenge the pagan culture beyond the parking lot. This, of course, means evangelism, but it means much more. Examples: I challenge the eldership to establish a Life committee to inform the Church how the battle goes against abortion and to see that the congregation is represented on the picket lines. Set up a Decency committee to enter the fight against the pornographers. Does the community know where you stand on the textbook controversy? On lotteries? On other vital issues involving ethics in public life? It's time the Christian Church/Church of Christ were hated for something besides its stand on baptism; it's time we earned the respect of the religious community by leading the fight against paganism and humanism. It's also time we got over being ashamed of the Plea and realized that it will be as beautiful to others as it is to us, if we only let them see it in its best light.

IX. To Restore Movement, We Must Teach this Generation about the History of the Restoration Movement.

We have avoided making cult figures of the Restoration fathers; that's good. It is time to educate this generation of the Church on the history of the Movement. The story of our beginnings is thrilling; we must not deprive today's Christian of a knowledge of his spiritual roots.

We must tell our children of the Campbell's, Stone, Raccoon John Smith, Walter Scott, and the others. Encourage your Church members to visit Cane Ridge and Bethany. Cicero said that that man who does not know history remains a child forever. Movement and growth, the kind we want, requires maturity, and maturity requires a sense of where the American Restoration Movement fits into history. We cannot trust ourselves to chart our future until we have made sure we understand our past.