

A HISTORICAL SUMMARY AND EVALUATION
OF THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

The Restoration Movement in America began as a unity movement that attempted to restore New Testament Christianity as a means of breaking down denomination barriers, however, the modern churches within the Restoration heritage have failed to live up to the objectives of the original visionaries of the group. As we shall see the unity that was the motivation for the movement has been slowly splintered over the past two centuries until the original concept of the churches is all but forgotten by its members. One possible explanation for this paradox is that “often, these people have argued that they have restored the primitive church of the apostolic age and are therefore nothing more or less than the true, original church described in the New Testament. For this reason, Churches of Christ generally have denied that they had a defining history other than the Bible itself and have expressed little or no interest in their particular history in the United States.”¹ If it is true that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it, then it is no wonder that they have become all that its founders despised in the religious environment from which they rebelled. In this paper I plan to present a summary of the historical events that initiated the Restoration Movement, I will present the theological and philosophical backgrounds of its various early leaders and then evaluate the modern branches of the movement, especially the one in which I find myself, the Churches of Christ, and try to determine how we have fallen short and what we may do to restore the original vision of the movement.

¹ Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 2.

KEY LEADERS IN THE EARLY YEARS

Thomas Campbell

Thomas Campbell was a “Scotch-Irish, anti-Burgher Presbyterian who came to America in 1807.”² Thomas had been raised in the Anglican Church but their cold religious services and lack of piety eventually caused him to leave the state church for the Seceder Presbyterian Church. From the outset of his time in the Presbyterian Church Campbell was shocked at the many and various divisions within the one denomination. Campbell was very influenced by the work of the independent and Puritan congregations that opened its pulpits to “Bible-believing ministers” that met in his town.³ The Rich Hill Independents, as they called themselves, “observed the Lord’s Supper every Lord’s Day, received weekly contributions, opposed going to theatres or places of public amusement, and encouraged Bible study apart from catechetical instruction.”⁴ Because of poor health, Thomas Campbell was advised to move from the Northern area of Ireland. On April 8, 1807, he began his journey to America and eventually settled in Pennsylvania. Almost immediately, Thomas began to notice that the same divisions that had separated the Presbyterians in Ireland were also evident in the New World. After several months of serving in the Secession Presbytery of Chartiers in Western Pennsylvania, the synod felt it needed to discipline the preacher because of his “freedom in welcoming Presbyterians of all parties to communion.”⁵ Thomas Campbell broke with the Secession Presbyterians and began to preach unity by means of restoration of New Testament ideals. The motto through which he expressed his vision was “Where the Scriptures speak,

² Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: MI: Zondervan, 1996), 429.

³ James DeForest Murch, *Christians Only: A History of the Restoration Movement* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing, 1962), 38.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1926), 581.

we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.’ It was not a new denomination that he planned, but a union of all Christians on the Biblical basis, without added tests of creed or ritual.”⁶ In applying this motto, however, many of his previously practiced traditions came into question, such as infant baptism and the means by which one is baptized. In response to the great criticism he received and the many questions people had for him he wrote the document entitled “*Declaration and Address*” in which he laid out thirteen propositions as to his reason for breaking from his previous tradition and his organization of the newly created *Christian Association of Washington*. These propositions dealt with issues like the “oneness” of the universal Church of Christ, the Bible as the only “rule of faith,” that differences of opinion should not be a test of fellowship, and faith in Christ as the sole means of Salvation.⁷ Eventually he came to the conclusion that there was no Biblical reference to infant baptism and that that the only form of baptism practiced in the primitive church was that of immersion. Because of this change in doctrine he and his newly founded independent church in Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania called the Bush Run church was invited to join the Redstone Association of the Baptist Church.⁸ However this new fellowship was short lived as there were several other issues that differentiated the two groups. Some of the disagreements between the two associations were that the Campbells, for Thomas had been joined by his son Alexander at this point, “disliked the Baptists’ strenuous Calvinism. To the Campbells the Old Testament was far less authoritative than the New. To the Baptists baptism was a privilege of the already pardoned sinner; to the Campbells it was a condition of forgiveness. Moreover, the Campbells, without being in any sense Unitarians, refused to employ other

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Murch, 45-47.

⁸ Ibid., 62.

than Scriptural expressions regarding the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁹ As a result of these differences the Bush Run church withdrew from the Baptists by 1827. After this time, the movement led by Campbell was generally known by the scriptural name of “Disciples.” Some of the defining characteristics of this church were that it considered “lay preaching as authorized, it denied the distinction between clergy and laity to be Scriptural,” and it observed the Lord’s Supper every Sunday.¹⁰

Alexander Campbell

Thomas’ family arrived in the United States in 1809. Alexander, apart from his father for the previous years, had come to his own conclusions about the Seceder Presbyterian Church while still in Ireland. He too saw the divisions and parties within the church as unbiblical and was greatly influenced as his father had been before him by the Baconian and Scottish Rationalism that was so prevalent in his home country.¹¹ In regards to the reunion of father and son James DeForest Murch writes, “Through long days and nights [they] poured out their hearts concerning their religious experiences. Thomas Campbell had met Alexander with some trepidation of spirit, wondering how Alexander would receive the story of Thomas’ unjust treatment by the American Presbytery and Synod and his decision to preach independently to audiences made up of people from all denominations. Strangely enough, Alexander, thousands of miles away, had been led by the Holy Spirit to an almost identical position.”¹² Alexander, who had attended school at Glasgow University, was made the preacher of the Bush Run church, and he and his father worked strenuously to apply the Scriptures to every aspect of church life and belief. Father and son agreed that the best way to

⁹ Walker, 582.

¹⁰ Murch, 52.

¹¹ Richard T. Hughes, *Reclaiming a Heritage: Reflections on the Heart, Soul & Future of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2002), 71.

¹² Murch, 57.

bring about the unity they desired was to return to a New Testament methodology for the church. In the introduction to his book *Christian Baptism* Campbell wrote, “We have proposed an *Evangelical Reformation* – or, rather, a return to the faith and manners anciently delivered to the saints – A Restoration of *original Christianity both in theory and practice*. The three capital points of which are: (1) The Christian Scriptures, the only rule and measure of Christian faith and learning, (2) The Christian confession, the foundation of Christian union and communion, and (3) The Christian ordinances – baptism, the Lord’s day, and the Lord’s supper – as taught and observed by the Apostles.”¹³ Alexander, over the next several years, showed his great talent for debate and this became a means by which many came to understand the theological and Biblical understanding of the early Restoration Movement.

Barton W. Stone

Born in 1772 in Maryland, Barton Warren Stone soon moved with his family to Pittsylvania County, Virginia. He attended David Caldwell Academy in North Carolina and it was there that he met the preacher James McGready who was a regular visiting preacher at the school. Murch writes that “On one of McGready’s visits, Stone came under deep conviction but could not find salvation in the horrific hell-fire and brimstone preaching to which he listened.”¹⁴ However, soon after hearing a sermon by William Hodge on the text “God is Love” Stone felt his heart moved and he surrendered completely to Christ. Upon his graduation, Stone was ordained by the Presbytery of Transylvania in spite of his often questionable doctrines on the subject of unity and fellowship. In 1801 Stone found himself in the midst of the famous revival at Cane Ridge near where he had been sent to preach.

“Stone disclaimed any credit for what happened, but he was an active participant in it,

¹³ Alexander Campbell, *Christian Baptism with its Antecedents and Consequents* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Company, 1951), xi.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

preaching day and night alongside Methodist, Baptist, and Independent preachers from western states.”¹⁵

One of the unfortunate consequences of the Cane Ridge revival was schism within the Presbyterian Church. After his revival experience which had affected all parties and denominations present, Stone began to see the divisions among men as being caused by the denominationalism that infected the religious world. Along with several other preachers Stone published *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, which “included an ‘Address’ which reiterated the opposition of the witnesses to ‘church sessions, presbyteries, synods, general assemblies, etc.’ as without precedent or example in the New Testament and closed with an appeal for the unity of all believers: ‘We heartily unite with our Christian brethren of every name, in thanksgiving to God for the display of his goodness in the glorious work he is carrying on in our Western country.’”¹⁶ Much like the Campbell movement in Pennsylvania, Stone’s movement attempted to use the Scriptures as its only compass in matters of church and faith. Therefore, it is not strange that he came to many of the same conclusions to which the Campbells came in their rigorous study the scriptures. However the two groups had very different perspectives from which they viewed those scriptures. As Campbell was a rationalist at heart who believed that adherence to the New Testament would bring unity, Stone was a pietist who believed apostolic holiness was the best means by which the desired unity could be attained.¹⁷ “Alexander Campbell embraced a highly optimistic view of the world... like many Americans living in the early nineteenth century, Campbell imagined that human progress would usher in the kingdom or rule of God and that Jesus would return only at the conclusion of that golden age... Barton Stone, on the

¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶ Murch, 89.

¹⁷ Hughes, *Reviving*, 11.

other hand, embraced a pessimistic understanding of the world” that can be described as “Apocalyptic...Stone and many who looked to him for leadership denied that human progress could contribute anything at all to the creation of the kingdom of God on this earth.”¹⁸ These differences also led to contrasting views of hermeneutics that were destined to plague the movement in the centuries that followed. But in spite of these differing perspectives the two movements officially united in Lexington, Kentucky in 1832.¹⁹

Walter Scott

Walter Scott, who had been raised a Presbyterian in Scotland and had emigrated to America in 1818 after receiving his degree at the University of Edinburgh, became one of the next generation leaders of the Restoration Movement and in many ways it was he who radicalized the ideas of Stone and Campbell.²⁰ Scott opened the movement’s first college and named it Bacon College in honor of his philosophical hero, Lord Francis Bacon, the father of the inductive method of reasoning. Murch sums up the Campbell and Scott contributions to the Restoration movement when he writes, “In Scott’s view, Thomas Campbell had restored the Bible as authoritative, Alexander Campbell had restored the ‘ancient order’ (worship and organization of the church) through his articles in the *Christian Baptist*, and he himself had restored the ancient gospel by means of the five-point plan of salvation.”²¹ The five-point plan of salvation that was developed by Walter Scott was an attempt to summarize the ancient gospel message as taught by the first century church. The five-points themselves were five human tasks: “hear the gospel (i.e., Jesus is the Messiah), believe the gospel, repent

¹⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 12.

²⁰ Ibid., 48.

²¹ Ibid., 53.

of one's sins, confess the name of Jesus, and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins."²² This simplistic yet radical approach to salvation resulted in a legalistic mindset that came to guide the Restoration Movement in the consecutive generations. "Scott's heirs transformed the five-point plan from one that emphasized both the work of humankind and the gracious response of God to one that featured only the work of humankind. By the twentieth century, this five-point plan of salvation had become commonplace and was routinely featured in Church of Christ preaching."²³

ROOTS OF RESTORATION

There are several concerns that contributed to the need for restoration in America during the nineteenth century. The major root issue that initiated the Restoration Movement, as already mentioned above, was the disunity and schisms that were increasingly prevalent after the Reformation in Europe and had emigrated in the United States. All of the major leaders in the movement that we have discussed came out of the Presbyterian tradition that had been especially fragmented. In the eyes of the restorationists this partisan attitude was due to the unscriptural use of creeds, unbiblical traditions, and a position of human reason over Scripture rather than using reason in light of Scripture. In regard to creeds Alexander Campbell wrote, "All creeds are mere theories of Christian doctrines, discipline, and government, exhibited as a basis of church union. Being speculative, they have always proved themselves to be 'apples of discord' or 'roots of bitterness' amongst Christian profession."²⁴ A further reason the restorationists saw a need for a return to New Testament Christianity was that they believed that the Reformation had not gone far enough in removing

²² Ibid., 52.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Campbell, ix.

the Romanist tendencies in its teaching and practice. Campbell writes, “A reformation of Popery was attempted in Europe full three centuries ago. It ended in a Protestant hierarchy, and swarms of dissenters. Protestantism has been reformed in Presbyterianism, - that into Congregationalism, - and that into Baptistism, etc., etc. Methodism has attempted to reform all, but has reformed itself into many forms of Wesleyism.”²⁵ In Campbells view all of these movements led to divisions of the church because they had begun in the wrong place. “All of them,” he maintained, “retain in their bosom, in their ecclesiastical organizations, worship, doctrines, and observances, various relics of Popery. They are, at best, but a reformation of Popery, and only reformation in part.”²⁶

Shortly after the beginning of the Restoration it became clear that there were truly two camps within the movement. One camp saw its main goal as ecumenical and attempted to unite the disjointed body of Christ into the Church universal that Jesus had prayed for in John 17. The other camp saw its task as restoring the forms, methods and faith of the first century church. This slight variance in vision caused a great rift in the movement that was not immediately apparent but was to come to fruition after the American Civil War.

Besides the ecclesiological and theological reasons listed above, there were also philosophical happenings in the world that led to the rise of the Restoration. The Enlightenment had a great affect on those who initiated the movement. As has been previously mentioned both Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott were greatly influenced by the methodology of Sir Francis Bacon and the empiricism of John Locke. The restorationists believed that they could aim their rational minds at the Scriptures and come to logical conclusions that all might agree with and thus end the divisions within the Church. Although

²⁵ Ibid., viii.

²⁶ Ibid., ix.

somewhat naïve from a postmodern perspective, this view is understandable given that many in that day and age believed that human reason could bring about the kingdom of God here on earth. Alexander Campbell went so far as to break down the different sections of the Bible into three major groups: facts that are to be believed, precepts that are to be obeyed, and promises that are to be enjoyed and hoped for. In this way, he proposed, “We can very easily and perspicuously distinguish what constitutes Christian faith, Christian obedience and Christian hope, not only from the Jewish and the Patriarchal, but also from all matters of speculation usually called opinions.”²⁷ This was the rationalistic means by which he believed unity would ultimately come to the church. He wrote, “We must be, because we can be, of one faith, of one obedience, and of one hope; but we need not be, because we cannot be, of one opinion, not being of one mental or physical constitution.”²⁸ The difficulty arose when people within the movement naturally believed that their opinions were scriptural. This continues to cause divisions in what was originally a unity movement even today.

DIVISION

Unity vs. Restoration or Unity through Restoration

One of the first major divisions within the Restoration Movement came shortly after the American Civil War. Many have attempted to blame this schism on the use of instruments verses a cappella worship. However the real issue began long before an organ was ever brought into a church building. The issue had to do with the vision of the Movement as a whole. Since each congregation was independent of one another they began to move in two distinct directions. For the most part the division occurred between North and South just as

²⁷ Ibid., xiv.

²⁸ Ibid., xv.

the country had so recently been divided. One party believed that unity should be the ultimate goal of the church, the other saw its main objective as restoration of the first century church. With these two distinct visions the groups began to stray in many ways in different directions. On the unity side the church attempted to keep up with the culture in which it found itself. On the restoration side the church became more sectarian, alienating itself from the world around it. The argument over whether or not to use instruments in worship was simply an example of how different these groups had become. Although some believed this to be a theological and scriptural argument, it was really a matter of how the church should relate to the world. By 1906, the two groups were recognized by the United States religious census as being two distinct denominations. The unity churches were known thereafter as “The Disciples of Christ” and the restoration driven churches were known as “Churches of Christ.”²⁹

Hermeneutical Differences

Hermeneutical differences also plagued the Movement as it often does to this day. The question arises out of the motto of the restorationists: “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the scriptures are silent, we are silent.”³⁰ The question is whether the silence of scripture is permissive or prohibitive. Once again the instrumental issue is a good example. The leftists would say that since the New Testament is silent on the issue, it is not an issue and therefore is allowed. Whereas Edward C. Wharton a theologian of the rightist Churches of Christ wrote, “concerning the instrument, it is not authorized in the New Testament. Where is a command, an example? Where is it in the sound words? To use it, it must be brought over from the Old Testament, which the early church did not do, or be added to the

²⁹ Hughes, *Reviving*, 12.

³⁰ Walker, 581.

New Testament by human innovation.”³¹ It is my opinion that this and other issues that have caused division over the years are red herrings that distract not only from the vision of the original restorationists, but from the vision of Christ when he founded the church. Over the last century the Restoration movement has seen other unfortunate schisms. Out of the Disciples of Christ came the centrist group simply called “The Christian Church.” Out of the Churches of Christ has come the even more legalistic Boston Movement (now known as the International Churches of Christ) which attempted to revitalize the evangelism and piety of the Churches of Christ by practice one-over-one discipleship that eventually was seen as cultish by many. Thus, unfortunately, the Restoration Movement is barely recognizable as the unity movement that Barton Stone and the Campbells set out to initiate two centuries ago.

CONCLUSION:

An Evaluation of the modern Restoration Movement in Light of Its History

One of the major issues that the churches within the Restoration find facing them in the new century is a lack of identity. Within the right wing of the movement, especially, that became the Churches of Christ the vision has become blurred. As I mentioned earlier, one of the main reasons for this lack of vision and identity is that many of the members of the Movement do not have any grasp on the history or the heritage to which they belong. Many churches have come to be identified more for what they do not believe than what they do believe. Joe Barnett, in 1979, attempted to sum up the beliefs of the church in a tract entitled *The Churches of Christ: Who Are These People?* Unfortunately the list of traits that made up the tract was a practical record of the issues that had led to the Church of Christ being divided from the other branches of

³¹ Edward C. Wharton, *The Churches of Christ: A Presentation of the Distinctive Nature and Identity of the New Testament Church* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Book House, 1970), 126.

the Restoration Movement. This is how he describes the identity of the Churches of Christ: “self-governing congregations with elders and deacons; five items of worship – singing, praying, preaching, giving, and the Lord’s Supper; a cappella singing in worship; the Lord’s Supper every Sunday; the five-step practice of believers’ immersion for the remission of sins.”³²

Unfortunately, this list does not include the most important identity of the church, the fact that it is supposed to be Christ’s Church. Towards the end of the last century leaders in the Restoration Movement began to see that their identity had drifted away from Christ and had begun to be based on opinions and traditions of men. For this reason there is within the Restoration Movement an attempt not only to undo the unscriptural splits that have occurred but also an attempt to renew the vision of the Church in alignment with the vision of Christ. Once again the Restoration slogan of “Christians only, but not the only Christians” is being heralded as a call to non-sectarianism and true Christian unity.³³ The question is being asked, “Is it the Campbellian view that (1) Christians are in all denominations, (2) we seek to be ‘Christians only, not the only Christians,’ and (3) we want to restore to the church universal certain doctrines it has neglected, such as the importance of believers’ immersion, weekly communion, and local church leadership? Or is it traditional doctrine which distorts the Campbells’ view and which holds that (1) only those in Churches of Christ are Christians, (2) baptism saves regardless of attitude, (3) communion is merely a weekly duty, and (4) elders rule the church with an iron hand?”³⁴ From this and many other recent writings it appears at least that the right questions are being asked in order to regain the historical vision of the Restoration leaders. It appears that we are beginning to remember our history and our heritage and the aspirations of Alexander Campbell who wrote,

³² Jeff Childers, Douglas A. Foster and Jack Reese, *The Crux of the Matter: Tradition and the Future of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2001), 131-132.

³³ *Ibid.*, 134.

³⁴ William Baker, *Evangelicalism & The Stone-Campbell Movement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 206.

“We ask for faith, and not for the deductions of reason; for the testimony of God, and not the opinions of men; and say with the apostle, ‘As many as walk by this rule, peace be on them and mercy, even upon the Israel of God.’”³⁵

³⁵ Campbell, xv.

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