

Modern History of Churches of Christ

Lesson 1: The Roots of American Restoration

Preliminary Observations:

- 1. Disclaimer:** I am not a “church historian”; I have little expertise in the historical details and sociological nuances of the “Restoration Movement.” The Vestavia elders have asked me to present a condensed version of material I prepared for study at Hueytown during January – March, 2001.
- 2. Warning:** To consider the “churches of Christ” as a unit over a definite historical period lends itself to a denominational outlook. When we speak of “non-institutional” churches doing this or that, we are by the very nature of our language considering the Lord’s body as a collection of churches. Further, we are putting our “stamp of approval” on various congregations solely on the basis of how they stood/stand on institutional or other singular issues. The faithfulness of a congregation of the Lord’s people is much more complex than its stance on a particular issue.
- 3. Format:** I would like for our study today to be fairly informal. I may ask questions and your comments are welcome. *Please keep them to a reasonable length as we have much material to cover in a short period of time.* Further, the purpose of this study is primarily historical overview rather than a doctrinal examination. Again, time constraints will not allow us to stray deeply into doctrinal intricacies of controversy.

1. The Goal of Restoration

- A. Many isolated pockets of “restorers” popped up across the frontier in the early 1800s. The euphoria of political independence gave impetus to pursue religious independence. Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell became two of the more prominent restorers, but they had many like-minded peers.
- B. As men studied the Bible for themselves, they repeatedly ran afoul of Calvinistic theology. Their independent reading of the Scriptures conflicted with the impractical doctrines of Calvin, especially regarding the simple process of salvation, and many began to rebel. One example from the life of Barton Stone is as follows:
 1. In a meeting at Millersburg, Kentucky, “the audiences were large and interest at a high pitch. After laboring with the mourners until late at night, Stone arose and said,

‘Brethren, something must be wrong; we have been labouring with these mourners earnestly, and they are deeply penitent; why have they not found relief? We all know that God is willing to pardon them, and certainly they are

anxious to receive it. The cause must be that we do not preach as the apostles did. On the day of Pentecost those who were ‘pierced to the heart,’ were promptly told what to do for the remission of sins. And ‘they gladly received the word and were baptized; and the same day about three thousand were added unto them’” (West, *Search for the Ancient Order*, pp. 30-31).

2. We may find it difficult to understand such struggles with what we consider foundational or self-evident matters. But we must strive to put ourselves in their cultural shoes and appreciate that their thinking was conditioned by denominational concepts. Breaking free of their preconceptions was not easy.
 3. Further adding to the frustration of frontier preachers was the harsh reaction of church leaders to honest inquiry and exploration. The rigor of Protestant orthodoxy was creating a similar backlash to the one against Catholicism that gave rise to the Protestant Reformation beginning in the 1400s. *History does have a way of repeating itself.*
- C. With strong yearning to be free of denominational constraints and a desire to unify all believers separated by sectarian barriers, Thomas Campbell first preached the theme “*Where the Bible speaks; we speak; where the Bible is silent; we are silent*” in Washington, PA, ca. 1808.
1. Earl West notes: “(Though) the idea Campbell presented in his motto was not new, it nevertheless was revolutionary in one phase: a few people now applied it to Protestant creeds and confessions of faith whereas, the Protestant bodies had almost exclusively applied it to Roman Catholic traditions. For the first time there were some who realized that the motto struck with equal force against human creeds as it did against Catholic traditions” (p. 47).
 2. The early to mid-1800s was a time of controversy as men like the Campbells, Barton W. Stone and Walter Scott, severed their denominational moorings. It was also a time of exhilarating exploration as they sailed upon the waters of Scriptural text alone. It was a time of thrilling discovery as they set foot on the solid ground of Biblical teaching concerning the free will of man, the universality of the gospel, the conditional nature of salvation, the organization of the church and freedom from ecclesiastical tyranny. Above all, it was a time of apprehension, for they did not know what ultimately lay over the horizon.
 3. West: “Neither Thomas Campbell himself, however, nor those associated with him, had a full conception of all that was involved in these principles. They only felt that the religious intolerance of the times had itself become intolerable, and that a reformation was imperiously demanded” (p. 48).

2. The Rise of Missionary Societies

A. Ed Harrell notes that “the chief irony and tragedy of all church history is that non-sectarian Christianity ... inevitably produces sects. Quite obviously the church of New Testament days was not very old before it gave birth to warring sects. The Restoration Movement quickly became a mirror of sectarian pressures within a non-sectarian movement” (*FC Lectures – 1976*, p. 193).

B. One “hangover” from denominational ties was the desire to create associations. Stone’s Springfield Presbytery (abandoned shortly after its inception) and Campbell’s Christian Association of Washington (PA) are early examples.

1. One theme running through the desire to organize was lack of confidence in the local church to do all the work assigned by the Lord. W.K. Pendleton, in explaining the purpose of the convention held in 1849 in Cincinnati, Ohio, which gave birth to the American Christian Missionary Society, said:

“We met, not for the purpose of enacting ecclesiastic laws, not to interfere with the true and scriptural independence of the churches, but to consult about the best ways for giving efficiency to our power, and to devise such methods of co-operation, in the great work of converting and sanctifying the world, as our combined counsels, under the guidance of Providence, might suggest and approve. There are some duties of the church which a single congregation cannot, by her unaided strength, discharge ... A primary object being to devise some scheme for a more effectual proclamation of the gospel in destitute places, both at home and abroad, the Convention took under consideration the organization of a Missionary Society” (West, p. 173).

2. The *goal* was noble: the evangelization of the world. But the *methodology* was misguided: combine the resources of local churches to create a centralized organization that would act on behalf of all.
3. But even this noble goal of saving the lost was skewed by post-millennial notions held by many restoration preachers. Earl Kimbrough notes:

“Postmillennial presuppositions figured prominently in Restoration ideology in the beginning years. This is not surprising for frontier America was dominated by the belief that “the kingdom of God” was about to be established in the land. This belief took both religious and secular forms. Many thought a political utopia was an imminent possibility. Evangelical Protestants widely believed that the golden age of the church, preceded by the conquest of the world by the Gospel, was at hand. Thus, postmillennial fervor was part of the influential cultural climate in which the Restoration was spawned” (*FC Lectures – 1976*, p. 62).

- C. But all did not accept the ACMS unreservedly. Throughout the latter half of the 1800's the debate over missionary societies intensified. It gradually became clear that a deep rift was developing among brethren in how the Bible should be used as a standard of authority.

3. The Dividing Line: Instrumental Music

- A. Two historians summarize the division among the restoration movement of the latter 1800s:

1. "For fifty years a breach had been forming within the Restoration movement. The emphasis upon organization, the introduction of instrumental music into worship, the involvement of women in leading public worship, and the acceptance of higher criticism by a large segment of Disciples caused the break" (Robert Hooper, *A Distinct People*, p. 47).
2. "While the movement had been moving toward division for many years for the variety of reasons we have surveyed thus far, the instrumental music controversy did more than any other factor to bring the division to a head. Fractures opened up in congregation after congregation, slowly at first during the 1870s and then at an accelerating rate during the 1880s and 1890s ... Finally, it became apparent to S.N.D. North, director of the 1906 Federal Census, that there were now two denominations rather than one, and he listed them separately that year as Disciples of Christ and Churches of Christ" (Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, pp. 87-88).

- B. Division among those who were once in spiritual fellowship usually develops gradually and is often not the result of a singular disagreement. To acknowledge that one can no longer count another as a legitimate brother in Christ and worthy of endorsement should be considered with utmost gravity. The truth is that many disagreements and conflicting views are often tolerated among brethren, but they can reach a "critical mass" where breach of fellowship becomes unavoidable.

1. Ed Harrell offers this assessment:

"Formal divisions within the restoration movement have always involved differences far more profound than the specific doctrinal issues that were the focus of theological debating; indeed the movement typically existed for long periods when considerable differences in practice and belief were tolerated. Schisms became formal only when leaders on the conflicting sides implicitly or explicitly decided that they no longer had the same understanding of the restoration plea, that they were no longer of the same mind. By the late nineteenth century the movement clearly included people with different theological understandings and ... religious agendas" (*The Churches of Christ in the Twentieth Century*, p. 6-7).

2. This seems to be true not only of the division of the late 1800s but also the mid-1900s over institutional and centralization issues. Various practices were initially tolerated that were later considered to be unscriptural. Because of a variety of changing circumstances, things that at one time may be taken at face value are looked upon quite differently as time passes.

C. Thus, two well-defined groups emerge among the restorationists as the twentieth century dawns: the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ (primarily centered around large northern cities) and churches of Christ (predominantly rural, southern congregations). The Christian Church/Disciples far outnumbered churches of Christ (three times more congregations and six times more members).

Conclusion:

The total picture of Restoration history is, of course, more complicated than this. Myriad influences of men, papers, conventions, colleges, debates and preaching all combined to make the issues cloudy and complex. It is only in historical hindsight and dispassionate distance that trends and shifts become clearer.

This is the challenge of every Christian in any age: To examine his/her own cultural surroundings in light of God's word and align himself with divine will on every issue.