ONGOING WORK OF RESTORATION

To “restore” means to bring something back to its original or unimpaired condition after it has deteriorated. The Restoration Movement is the term commonly applied to a series of independent attempts, by individuals or groups in the British Isles and in America, to restore the relevant features of the apostolic church that, to a large extent, had become lost, corrupted, or disregarded by hundreds of years of human tampering with God’s order. The sixteenth century Reformation succeeded in restoring some lost features of New Testament Christianity. The work of the reformers greatly aided the later Restoration Movement. The principle service the reformers rendered to the cause of apostolic Christianity was breaking papal power over the faith of millions, returning the Bible to the people, and holding the Bible as supreme authority in religion.

But the Reformation largely focused on reforming the worst features of the Roman Catholic Church. In seeking to accomplish that goal, they only succeeded in adopting different human names, creeds, and ecclesiastical structures that hopelessly divided them into warring sects. The resulting Protestant denominationalism squelched any substantial progress toward a return to the New Testament order and effectively blocked the means to that end. By the time that the Restoration Movement began, denominationalism had further degenerated into rancorous, and often merciless, sectarian strife, not only between the major religious bodies, but also between factions within the different communions. Most of the churches also become hopelessly enmeshed in European politics, which further stultified any lingering aspirations for restoration.

The Restoration Movement is not the church and many of the attempts at restoration within the movement either stagnated before attempting to affect a complete return to the apostolic order, or eventually lost their restoration steam and returned to denominationalism. However, correcting recognized corruptions of the church was a common thread of all restoration efforts. The early reformers mostly stressed the authority of the Bible, freedom from human creeds and ecclesiastical institutions, congregational independence, and the name of Christ. The major movements that succeeded in substantially restoring the salient features of the New Testament church are identified with the names of Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone, although there were an untold number of minor restoration efforts that merged with these to become a united movement between 1830 and 1860.

This “high watermark” of the nineteenth century Restoration Movement was followed by division that began in earnest after the Civil War, although its roots reached back to the founding of the American Christian Missionary Society in 1849. The division resulted from a change in emphasis of the original plea. The more liberal outlook was championed by Isaac Errett and the *Christian Standard*. Although not strong when the *Standard* was launched in 1866, by the time of Errett’s death in 1888, it had become the dominant view. By 1906, the churches were divided into two definable brotherhoods. The conservative churches of Christ continued to occupy the original aim of complete restoration, with respect for the silence of the Scriptures, while the majority was satisfied to compromise with innovations.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the churches of Christ recovered from being a dejected minority to become one of the fastest growing religions in America before the beginning of World War II. There were faction among these churches during this period, including the-Sunday School, one cup, and premillennial fellowships. Following the war, institutionalism and some elements of the social gospel troubled and divided the churches. The majority cast its lot with institutionalism. Since the 1960s, the institutional churches have been troubled by theological liberalism. While the non-institutional churches are troubled by a question of whether the restoration is a completed task with no room for further adjustments to accommodate the teaching of Christ and the practice of the apostolic church.

The ongoing work of restoration, the theme of this study, addresses the question of whether restoration is yet a valid, or an ongoing pursuit for Christians today. We believe that the concept of restoration is necessarily an ongoing work for reasons that will be given. And to the extent that the word “movement” conveys the idea of independent groups working concertedly toward a common goal, it seems proper to speak of this ongoing work as a continuation of the Restoration Movement. But to profitably engage in a study of this kind, four facts must be recognized: (1) that there is a divine standard; (2) that it contains every age-lasting feature of apostolic Christianity, (3) that following that divine plan is possible and practical today, and (4) that there are numerous congregations today that have, at least to a large degree, approximated that plan in their organization, work, and worship.

These things bring true, we believe that restoration *must be* an ongoing work for Christians. Before showing *why* this is true notice three things that limit this study: (1) Restoration pertains only to *individuals and congregations*. There is no “brotherhood” restoration in the Biblical sense. The church in its universal sense is a relationship between Christ and individual Christians, the saved. (Eph. 1:20-23.) God alone can add to it or take from it. We can no more restore the church in this sense that we can recreate the world. (Dan. 2:44; Eph. 3:20-21.) F.B. Srygley was about right in saying: “My plea is not to restore Christ as head, but to restore the people to the body, over which he is head.” (2) There are different levels of restoration, ranging from a return from complete apostasy to the restoring of some lost features of the church. One does not need to rebuild a house when all it needs is a coat of paint or a new roof. (3) The principle point in restoration is to bring man into line with God’s standard. Therefore, an ongoing work of restoration may be preventative in nature. At least, in F.B. Srygley’s words to keep the brethren “stored.” The Good Physician not only heals the sick, he also keeps folks well.

With this before us, we will proceed in succeeding articles to give some reasons why we believe that restoration *must be* an *ongoing* work Christians today.

**Salvation and Drifting**

Should Christians today be concerned about restoration as an ongoing work? This is the question in this study. We are not talking about a concern about Restoration history, however beneficial that may be, but rather concern about the principles or ideals of the Restoration Movement that are in harmony with the Scriptures. Those principles are embodied in the often quoted, but sometimes misapplied words of Thomas Campbell: “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.” Should this Bible-based objective be a concern today? We believe it should for the following reasons.

The divine plan of salvation is in reality an ongoing restoration work. In the beginning, man had complete and unblemished fellowship with God in a sinless state. (Eccl. 7:29.) God made Adam and Eve upright, without any imperfection or corruption, conformable to his own holiness. God not only made the first man and woman upright, but every soul that he brings into the world is upright. “The son shall not bear the guilt of the father.” (Ezek. 18:20.) All children are born sinless.

Satan introduced sin into the world to ruin the perfect relationship that man had with God. “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.” (Rom. 5:12.) By the transgression of Adam and Eve, sin was introduced into the world and the disease has been found to be highly contagious. So much so, that it is said of accountable beings that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:23.) Sin prevailed on the earth so greatly that not one responsible person was free of its guilt.

There was nothing that *man* could do to be restored to a sinless state before God.

At the entrance of sin, the grace of God began unfolding a *restoration plan* by which sinful man could be restored to fellowship with God. This is first intimated in the Lord’s words to Satan: “And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.” (Gen. 3:15.) In light of later promises and their fulfillment, this is seen as an impending victory over Satan, the father of sin. (John 8:44; 1 John 3:8.)

The means of restoring man to fellowship with God is through the death of Christ.

In destroying the works of the devil by his death on the cross, Jesus made man’s resto-ration possible. “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Rom. 5:1.)

God’s first promise of a redeemer was to Abraham. (Gen. 12:3.) The promise was afterward amplified to the patriarch and more fully described prophetically by Moses, Nathan, Isaiah, and other prophets of God. Thus the theme of the Bible is the restoration of fallen man to fellowship with God through Christ. The purpose of preaching the gospel is to restore man to this fellowship. The reason the early Christians continued steadfastly in the apostles teaching was so that their restored state might be continued. Reclaiming the alien sinners through the gospel and restoring wayward brethren who depart from the faith has been committed to the church. (1 Tim. 3:15.) So how could Christians today not be conscious of restoration as an ongoing work?

The inclination of God’s people to drift away makes restoration timely. God’s people in the Old Testament were continually departing from the right way. This was true of the pre-flood world, of Noah’s descendants after the flood, and even God’s chosen nation of Israel. The hundred and twenty years of respite before the flood brought no change in man’s sinful behavior. However, Noah found favor with God, and by him God proposed to restore the earth to purity after the flood, but man’s inclination to sin was soon apparent again. Paul describes what happened in Romans 1:21-23. God then abandoned man to his own ways and made no attempt to restore his fellowship. Yet, he left witness of himself and made it possible for those who sought him to find him. (Acts 17:27-28.) Until the coming of Christ, God chose Abraham to provide for himself a man, a family, and a nation to serve him.

But the nation that sprang from Abraham also proved man’s inclination to depart from God. From Israel’s wilderness experience and the time of the judges, repeated apostasy is nation’s history. As in the time of Joshua, there were periods in which the people restored the way of the Lord and served him faithfully for a while. However, these periods of faithfulness were always followed by periods of drifting and apostasy. Yet, even in periods of general apostasy, there were those, like Elimelech and Naomi “in the days when the judges ruled,” who remained faithful to the Lord.

The same story took place after Israel chose a king to be like the nations around them. There were good kings like David and Hezekiah, but the kings were mostly bad and led Israel into idolatry, until God finally sent his people away into captivity. But restoration was always in the mind of God and the prophets were divine restorers. Their restoration efforts were aimed in three directions. (1) They pled with *apostates* to return to the way of the Lord. “Thus says the Lord: ‘Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And Walk in it.” (Jer. 6:16.) (2)They watched for *signs of apostasy* and warned the people of the dangers. The Lord said: “I have set watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem, Who shall never hold their peace day or night.” (Isa. 62:6.) (3) The prophets continually instructed the people in the way of God and exhorted them to be faithful in it. They said: “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” (Isa. 8:20.) The prophets of old show the need for an ongoing concern for restoration. There is such a close parallel of the principles involved that the Restoration leaders often found illustrations for their work in the prophets. (Rom. 15:4.) Thomas Campbell made at least forty-five Old Testament references in *Declaration and Address*.

Time would fail to cite all the *New Testament* examples of the propensity of individual Christians and congregations to depart from the way of God. Here again we see the importance not only of restoring the fallen and warning the stumbling, but also of edifying the faithful. “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in the spirit of gentleness.” (Gal. 6:1.) Here is a work of restoration that surely must not be neglected. W.E. Vine says: “The tense is the continuous present, suggesting the necessity for patience and perseverance in this process.” The Lord pleaded with the church at Ephesus to remember the place from which they had fallen and set about to restore themselves to it. (Rev. 2:5.)

While the Ephesians’ lamp stand had not been removed, the church was on the verge of losing its favor with the Lord. The thing to be restored at Ephesus is the one thing that was missing. The Lord said: “you have left your first love.” The church appears to have been sound in every other way. The condition the New Testament churches—Ephesus, Pergamos, Laodicia, Corinth, et al. indicates that the danger of apostasy is always present. So there is *always* the need for ongoing restoration work, at one level or another.

**Apostasy and Imperfection**

Brethren sometimes speak of the Restoration Movement only in the past tense. It is true that the Restoration Movement is an historical reality and in regard to its origin and progress in the nineteenth century concerns the activity of a bygone era. However, the *principles* that made the movement effective in returning people to the apostolic order two hundred years ago should not be relegated to the musty achieves of history. They are as valid and timely today as they were then. In this sense, Restoration must be an ongoing work for Christians who are interested in divine truth. Here are some additional reasons why this is so.

There are numerous warnings in the Scriptures against apostasy. Almost every chapter in the New Testament states or implies a warning against Christians departing from the faith. Paul warned: “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fal.l” (1 Cor. 10:12.) The apostasy of Christians is not only possible, it is also ever threat-ening, and often occurs. Thus, there are not only those who need restoring, but there are those who need to be warned lest they fall. “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.” (Heb. 3:12.) Among the Hebrew Christians there was a general tendency to drift away from the gospel of Christ. The Book of Hebrews is designed to encourage a *restoration movement* in regard to these wavering brethren.

If the falling away of individual Christians is an ominous danger requiring con-tinued vigilance, what about a *congregation* of Christians? If one can fall, the whole can fall. Paul’s admonition to the Ephesian elders foresaw an impending apostasy. “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” (Acts 20:29-32.)

The departure from the faith that the apostle warned about would embrace the leaders and might very well effect the whole congregation. Continued vigilance is urged. The elders must be on guard for themselves and for the flock. This would both prevent apostasy and correct it as and when it began. The word of God must be constantly held before the church as the standard. Apostasy can come quickly, as Paul discovered with the churches of Galatia. (Gal. 1:6-9.) These churches were apparently on the brink of apostasy. Judaizing teachers had gone from church to church sowing their false doctrine. Individuals who fall away may pull others, even a whole congregation, down with them. In Galatians we see that individuals working among several churches in a district may work havoc in several congregations. Paul again imposes an ongoing effort to reclaim lost individuals and congregations. His remedy is the certified gospel. (Gal. 1:10-12.)

*There are no perfect Christians or congregations.* The pervasive nature of sin means that there is no perfection except in Christ. Every responsible individual *has* sinned, *does* sin, and *will* sin as long as he lives on earth. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.” (1 John 1:8-10.) John included himself and spoke in the present tense. So none is *of himself* free of sin. “To say that we have reached a sinless state in which we no longer need the blood of Christ to cleanse us is a deception. This language is in square opposition to the claims of the ‘Perfectionists’ of all ages” (Barton W. Johnson). Confessing sin means “if we keep on confessing” (A.T. Robertson). This implies that we keep on sinning. It is only through the blood of Christ that individuals are made perfect in him. (1 John 1:8-10; 2:1-2.) The aim of the Christian is to be free of sin and he orders his life in that direction, but even with that aim, sin does occur, and John gives assurance of the remedy. The church is made up of imperfect Christians. So there are no perfect congregations.

Every New Testament church fell short of God’s perfect plan. Much that was written to the churches was to correct error and to warn of apostasy if the error was not corrected. Yet, imperfect churches, like imperfect Christians, may be in fellowship with Christ. Corinth is an example. Corinth was far from perfect, yet Paul addressed them: “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who *are sanctified in Christ Jesus*, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.” (1 Cor. 1:2.) The church was made up of those who were sanctified in Christ, hence saved and in fellowship with him. Yet, no church, so for as we know, was beset with more errors that needed correcting: ranging from carnal division to toleration of a sinful brother.

The Corinthians were warned to correct the errors, i.e., to restore the apostolic order, lest they fall. (1 Cor. 4:6, 14.) Paul exposed the fault, gave the remedy, and warned the brethren to heed what he said. The apostle’s general instruction to the church is given in 1 Corinthians 15:58. This should be the aim of all. A study of the seven churches of Asia shows three general conditions a congregation may be in: (1) There were those, although not sinless, against whom the Lord had *no special warning*: Smyrna and Philadelphia. (2) There were those that while yet in fellowship with Christ had *serious flaws* that needed correcting: Ephesus, Pergamos, and Thyatira. (3) There were those whose errors had brought them to the *brink of rejection*: Sardis and Laodicia. The nature of sin in the church indicates a constant need for warnings, rebukes, and corrections, which if not pursued would result in apostasy (Rev. 2:5).

Atrophy is a fact of life both in the physical and spiritual world. Buildings, people, and congregations deteriorate and eventually become ruins, if continual repairs are neglected. The prodigal son is an example. “And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want.” (Luke 15:13-14.) He allowed his life to fall apart through neglect of the right way and failure to correct his way when he began to fall. What happened to him happens to *congregations* when they lose sight of Christ and go their own way. They waste their divine inheritance and find themselves in a foreign land, feeding swine. They are alienated from Christ and the blessings of the gospel.

But “he came to himself … And he arose and came to his father.” (Luke 15:17, 20). The boy saw his true condition, remembered his father’s house, repented of his wrong, and went back home in deep humility. He was then restored to the place he had before as a son in his father’s house, being royally clothed and fed with the finest fare. A Christian or a congregation that becomes estranged from Christ, like the prodigal son, can be restored to the right way, with the blessings of the heavenly Father.

**Heritage and Tradition**

In the preceding portions of this study, four reasons for continuing the work of restoration are given. Restoration should be an ongoing work because: (1) the plan of salvation is an enduring restoration work; (2) God’s people are inclined to drift from safe moorings; (3) the Scriptures are replete with warnings against apostasy; and (4) there are no perfect Christians or congregations of Christians. The concluding part of the study sets forth two additional reasons why continued emphasis on restoration is important.

*Religion is not an inherited commodity*. The children of faithful Christians are not atomically faithful. Nor is the continued faithfulness of a congregation into succeeding generations inevitable. “The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.” (Ezek. 18:20.) Christians should rear their children in the right way of the Lord. (Rom. 14:12.) But no matter how well trained they are, each must determine for himself to follow the Lord.

When the righteous generation contemporary with Joshua died, “another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel.” (Judges 2:10.) Their failure to know the Lord resulted in apostasy and a restoration was in order. The church where four generations of my father’s family were members yet lives and is 160 years old. Membership has turned over completely three or four times. Unless the principles of the Restoration had been an ongoing work, it would long since have ceased to exist as a faithful congregation.

The church at Ephesus shows what can take place when years pass and the membership changes in a church. Paul in his day spoke of the church’s “faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints.”(Eph. 1:15-16.) But a different attitude is manifested by the church in regard to love in another generation. When Jesus wrote to the church some thirty-five years later, he said: “Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.” (Rev. 2:2-4.) A generation is usually thought to be 30-40 years. So if Ephesus experienced a normal change in membership, there would be many of a new generation among them. The elders to whom Paul spoke in Acts 20 may have been completely replaced by 96 A.D. But for whatever reason, a change had taken place at Ephesus.

Where there are merging generations in a congregation, there is sometimes a struggle between them for a change. In some things, this may be good. Improvements can be made. But in many the change desired is away from the divine pattern. F. B. Srygley said: “Some of us have been afraid that the young people would run away with the wagon.” He also said: “Sometimes brethren complain that we are in a rut; but that is all right, if it is God’s rut.” The reality of changes in membership, whatever their nature in a particular congregation, indicates a need for a continued emphasis on Restoration principles.

*The church is always in danger of becoming tradition bound.* A tradition (*paradoses*) is something that is handed down as a belief, teaching, or practice. Traditions are not necessarily bad. In fact, some traditions are good, especially the apostolic traditions. “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.” (2 Thes. 2:15.) There are also human traditions that fall into the realm of expedients. (1 Cor. 6:12; see 1 Cor. 10:23.) “The worth of a tradition lies not in the form but in the source and the quality of the content.” (A.T. Robertson). Apostolic traditions are the inspired teaching and practice received by the apostles from the Lord and made known by the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor. 11:23.) These must be held fast. (Col. 3:17.)

Lawful expedients often become traditions in a congregation. These are permissible arrangements or practices in carrying out divine requirements. Such expedients are neither right nor wrong within themselves. Expedients become traditions when they are *habitually* done. W.A. Cameron held gospel meetings for a congregation in Florida every year for more than half a century. The expedient became a tradition. A congregation’s order of worship (each seems to have a little different procedure) is usually traditional. An elderly sister in a congregation long ago occupied a particular seat in the meetinghouse for many years, which she protected like a mother hen over a chick. That was a tradition with her and none dare deprive her of it.

But just here there is a great danger. Lawful human traditions must be watched and weighed in the light of divine truth lest they replace the principle on which they rest and became a law unto themselves. Lawful traditions may become sinful. They are wrong when bound as a law, when they replace divine truth, or when they cause chaos or stumbling in the church. Pharisees asked Jesus: “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread?” (Matt. 15:2.) They made the traditions of their fathers as binding as the law of God. These very likely began as expedients that at first were helpful to the Jews in the time of the Captivity and their restoration to .Canaan. But whatever useful purpose they may have served in the past, they had become binding laws made equal, and in some cases superior, to the law of God. Such is the nature of traditions. Jesus shows his disregard for such by refusing to accept them or to teach his disciples to do so.

John said: “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.” (2 John 1:9.) The Scriptures forbid the binding of any human tradition, whether a belief, teaching, or practice. The point here is that teaching the principles of the Restoration, which are Bible principles, will help us to distinguish between what is bound by apostolic authority, what is a permissible expedient, and what is a tradition that takes on the force of law. Brethren should not change expedients purely for the sake of change. When people become change-minded they are apt to change more than a light bulb. On the other hand, brethren should not become so set in their lawful traditions that they get out of sorts if a change is made, or even suggested. But, as Srygley again said: “Churches will often get cluttered up with customs and habits that the Bible says nothing about.”

**Summary.** We have noticed six good reasons why continued emphasis on the principles of the Restoration must not be neglected by individual Christians or conger-gations. It is helpful to study the history of the early Restoration Movement itself, but the emphasis here is on *the principles* of the Restoration, which may be summarized in four verses. “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” (Col. 3:17.) “If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God.” (1 Pet. 4:11.) “…contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 1:3.) “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.” (2 Cor. 13:5.)

F.B. Srygley had it about right when he said: “If I had the privilege of drinking water from the Jordan River, I should desire to drink it at its source rather than to drink of it after it flowed through several Arab camps.”