

HAS THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH BEEN RESTORED?

By Dub McClish

Introduction

It has become popular among numerous religious elitists to guffaw at the very suggestion that the original church has been restored to its pristine state in modern times. Such scoffers utter a resounding “no” in answer to the question of our title, believing that only Neanderthal nincompoops would even entertain the notion. Behind the restoration denials of many of these folk lie two even more fundamental denials. They deny both the **need for** and the **possibility of** restoration.

In actuality, we may answer both “yes” and “no” to this question and be correct in both cases. If one is considering personal holiness and spiritual maturity in the lives of those who constitute the church, we would not be honest in claiming that we have restored such qualities fully so that no room for improvement exists. However, if the “structure” and activities of the Lord’s people as congregations or churches is under consideration, we confidently answer, “Yes, the New Testament church needs to be restored when it has apostatized, it is possible to restore it, and it **has been restored** in modern times and now exists in a restored condition.” In studying the subject of restoration, it is important for us to distinguish between personal spiritual qualities of individual saints and corporate considerations relating to the church.

Personal Spiritual “Restoration” Is a Perpetual Process

The New Testament persistently prompts its readers to godliness and spiritual maturity. First, it sets forth the perfect model of godliness in the person of the Lord Jesus, with the injunction: “He that saith he abideth in him ought to walk, even as he walked” (1 John 2:6). Second, the text of the New Testament ever prescribes the perfect pattern of righteous behavior and incessantly urges its readers thus to live. Peter’s familiar “Christian graces” provide a fair summary of the whole:

Yea, and for this very cause adding on your part all diligence, in your faith supply virtue; and in your virtue knowledge; and in your knowledge self-control; and in your self-control patience; and in your patience godliness; and in your godliness brotherly kindness; and in your brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, they make you to be not idle nor unfruitful unto the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:5–8).

I must tell you that I still have work to do in all of these areas. Is there a man or woman, a boy or girl, among the Lord's people who has no room for improvement in such areas of personal growth and spiritual development? Has any Christian husband or wife perfected his or her role? Are there any elders who cannot be better shepherds of the flock? When was the last time you met or heard a flawless preacher? To ask these questions is to answer them. That giant of spiritual strength and maturity, the apostle Paul, still had to say of himself, "Brethren, I count not myself yet to have laid hold..." (Phi. 3:13), and "I buffet my body, and bring it into bondage: lest by any means, after that I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected" (1 Cor. 9:27). If Paul still had to work toward greater spiritual maturity in the prime of his devoted life as a servant of the Christ, then no one should think he has reached a plateau beyond which he has no need for further growth.

The remonstrance of those who ridicule the claim of the reality of restoration often focuses upon the personal, human shortcomings of individual saints. Typical (and in the forefront) of those who deride the idea of a restored church is the mockery of Rubel Shelly. In a 1990 speech to the Richland Hills Church of Christ (since renamed, "The Hill Church of Christ"), the latter-day Shelly averred:

Which church do you want to restore? Jerusalem, with its lack of evangelistic zeal? Or restore Corinth with its open fornication and drunkenness in church services around communion time? What about Colossae with its heresy? What about Ephesus? What about Laodicea, that church that says, "We've got it?" And He said, "You're dead as a hammer and don't know it." They said, "We don't need anything," and He said, "You need everything."
(Music, 296).

Notice his emphasis on apathy, immorality, susceptibility to heresy, and smug lukewarmness—all of which had to do with personal spiritual failings and flaws in human beings. All such things pertain to the human element in and of the church. Restoring the church has to do with the Divine element—the church as the Lord built it through the preaching of the apostles.

I remind us that no **individual** human being—besides our Lord—has attained moral and/or spiritual perfection, and none ever shall: "for all have sinned [an aorist tense form, embracing all who have lived in the past], and fall short [a present tense form, embracing all now living and all who will live] of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Human imperfections, flaws, and sins are the very reason God had to come in the flesh to save us. Personal spiritual "restoration" is an unending process, even for the best among us.

Almost twenty years ago, I wrote the following words in addressing some of these Shelly contentions, which words still fully reflect my convictions:

I know of no one who would deny that the human element of the church has always been and will ever be imperfect. It is not possible for even the most dedicated believer to live above sin absolutely. One who claims to do so is a liar (1 John 1:8). Members of the church of God will always be fallible creatures ever in need of pressing on “toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phi. 3:14).

However, when we consider the Divine element of the church (the way the Lord ordained, planned, and built His church), that is another matter altogether. The Divine element relates to the way the church is to be organized, the way it is to worship, the way men may enter it, and what its work and nature are (McClish 518–19).

To point to the failures in the personal lives of Christians as evidence that “the church” has not been restored is beyond absurd. Such is comparable to denying that a fully restored automobile is not actually restored because some of its passengers are drunk. I suspect that those who thus argue know that their contention is a ruse, but they have nothing else to offer in light of Scriptural teaching and prevailing evidence that contradict it.

Let us turn now to the question of restoration as it pertains to the design, framework, and pattern the New Testament sets forth for the church.

Is Restoration Necessary or Possible?

Before we more directly address the **actuality** of restoration, we must address the question of whether or not it is **possible** and/or **necessary** to effect such. Many in the church now deny both. If they are right, then actuality of restoration is a moot question.

To deny the principle, plea, possibility, and actuality of restoring the church requires a broadside against Scripture-based and time-tested Biblical hermeneutics. It is no wonder then that they seek release from all Bible authority by repudiating what they call “pattern theology.” They view what they style as the “old hermeneutic” of applying Scripture by means of observing its direct statements, accounts of action, and implications with equal repugnance and disdain. They have nothing but ridicule for the concept of prohibitions based upon Scriptural silence. While decrying what they call our “proof-text hermeneutics” that expose their error, it is noteworthy that they eagerly—and hypocritically—run to and with a passage when they think it supports their contention.

Let us now briefly address the dual-pronged denial that restoration is either necessary or possible. By several avenues of proof we may certify the falsity of all such caviling.¹

1. God has made His will known through patterns, which He expects men to follow. When followed, they produce that for which the pattern calls, whether in personal or corporate behavior. Hebrews 8:5–6 makes it abundantly clear that God has a pattern for the church, even as he had for the Mosaical tabernacle. In verse 5 the inspired writer repeats God’s injunction to Moses not to vary in the least from the Divine pattern for the tabernacle (Exo.

25:40). Verse 6 then immediately emphasizes the superiority of the religion of Christ to that of Moses, of which the church is the embodiment.

The argument of the passage is from the lesser to the greater, and may be stated as follows: Since God was so concerned with the minute details of the inferior institution (i.e., the tabernacle), He is therefore **much more concerned** that the superior institution (i.e., the church) be built to his specifications. **Denial of this explicit Scriptural truth—God has a pattern for the church, and He expects men to follow it—is the basis of all denials relating to restoration** (i.e., possibility, necessity, actuality). Liberals believe God has left “structural” matters pertaining to His church “wide open.”

2. When individual saints stray from the Truth in doctrine or behavior, they can be restored to faithfulness. If this premise is not true, then numerous Biblical exhortations are meaningless (e.g., Gal. 6:1; Jam. 5:19–20; Jude 22–23; et al.). In fact, the backslider and apostate **must** be restored if he would be saved at last.
3. Incessant New Testament insistence on doctrinal purity (e.g., Mat. 15:9; Rom. 16:17–18; 1 Cor. 4:17; Gal. 1:6–9; 1 Tim. 1:3, et al.) argues that those who digress from the faith, whether individuals or congregations, not only can, but **must** be restored if God and Son are to be pleased.
4. The “seed principle” implies the possibility of restoration, if not its necessity. Seed brings forth only after its kind (Gen. 1:11–12; Gal. 6:7), and the Word of God is the “seed of the kingdom” (Luke 8:11).

After the Jerusalem church began on Pentecost (and the Holy Spirit **did call** those obedient believers “the church” [Acts 5:11; 8:1, 3; 11:22, et al.]), by what means did churches spring up elsewhere? By what means was the church in Antioch recognized as and called such (11:26; 13:1; 14:27)? Are we to suppose they had nothing in common (e.g., entrance requirements, worship, organization) with the Jerusalem church to cause the Holy Spirit thus to designate them? And what about those religious bodies the Holy Spirit designated as churches “throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria” (9:31) and “the seven churches that are in Asia” (Rev. 1:4), to say nothing of all of those established by Paul and Barnabas on their initial preaching trip into Asia Minor (Acts 14:23)? How could they be thus recognized and identified without certain marks of identity?

Over the past several decades, from time to time, brotherhood news sources have publicized the discovery of indigenous congregations after the New Testament order in various parts of the world. These believers had no previous contact with or knowledge of others who believed and practiced as they did. They simply researched the New Testament and formed congregations on the basis of what they found. Such cases are proof that there is a pattern for the church, said pattern is discernible, and it is possible to apply this pattern and reproduce the original. They allowed the seed to germinate in their hearts, and it brought forth after its kind, resulting in New Testament congregations.

Scriptural and logical evidence abounds to convince unbiased hearts that God and His Son **demand** restoration of the church Jesus built when apostasy and corruption overtake it. Since Deity has never demanded the impossible of men, we must therefore conclude that restoration of His church is possible.

Is Restoration of the Church a Reality?

Ours is not the first era to have its restoration deniers and detractors. Benjamin Franklin (descendant of the Colonial statesman) was one of the powerful voices of the nineteenth century who preached and practiced going back to the old paths—restoring the church that had suffered hundreds of years of apostasy and corruption. When the missionary society and instrumental music elements arose, he boldly opposed and exposed both, recognizing that there was no place for them in the “Reformation” (their term for the restoration). He addressed the digressives who had given up on the plea and were calling it a failure:

It is true, also, that “God’s word, as the only rule of faith and practice, is as much set at naught by the religious world today as it was fifty years ago,” and more, too; and there is nothing so unpopular with the masses of the people, and some **called brethren**, as precisely the apostolic way; and the Reformation is not a failure, either.

Our reformatory movement was right, and is still right. It needs no modification, but needs to be faithfully and honestly carried out.... It went back to the Divine fountain to find the truth.... It went back to the Bible itself.... It went back to the religion of Christ itself.... This was no failure. The attempt was to go back to the Lord Himself; to His own Book, His own religion; and those who attempted this, and **did it**, made no failure. They found the Lord, His Book, and His religion, and found the salvation of the Lord. There was no failure in all this (emph. in orig.) (Headington 96–97).

In 1968, after I had preached a sermon in which I identified faithful churches of Christ at the time with the church set forth in Scripture, a young man came by to see me. He was the son of one of the families in the congregation and was a student at Abilene Christian College (now ACU). He was all but incredulous at my audacity, arrogance, and bigotry (as he perceived matters) in daring to make such an identity. He left my study disgusted that anyone would be so narrow-minded and self-righteous as to thus affirm. He voiced what has become the prevailing view of tens, if not hundreds of thousands in the church over the past four decades. I was unable to penetrate his emotion-based contention with either Scripture or logic. He left even more upset than when he came. My convictions remain the same now as they were then, for Scripture and reason will allow me no other option.

At the time this young man came to my study, the same Rubel Shelly, quoted earlier in a statement radically denouncing the concept of restoration, was staunchly advocating the **validity** of the plea for restoration (he began revealing his liberal bent in the early 1980s).

Further, he was not reticent about declaring that the restored church exists today. Forty years ago (almost to the day as I write these words), the *Gospel Advocate* published an article by Shelly relative to the question with which this chapter deals (in fact, the title of Shelly's 1971 article was identical with the title of this chapter). It is impossible to misunderstand him:

I categorically deny the notion that the restoration plea is invalid. I also deny that the goal of restorationism is yet unrealized. **The New Testament church, the body and bride of Christ, does exist in the twentieth century, and I am a member of that body** (emph. DM) (Shelly 793).

As he answered in his statement, so I answer—agreeing with him in toto (except to update his statement from the twentieth to the twenty-first century).

Bases of the Claim of Present-day Restoration

Having affirmed that the restored church presently exists, it is now time to examine the bases for the affirmation. The Shelly-type heretics now prattle on about their repentance regarding the sermons they had once preached (in their immature pre-apostate days) on the “identifying marks of the church,” and they promise never to do so again. I submit, however, that it is impossible to conceive of it apart from such marks. I aver that such brethren deny that there are such specifications in an effort to justify their ecumenical plotting and planning. In fact, we may ponder in what sense the church can exist at all apart from certain recognizable characteristics peculiar to it.

While the church is indeed a spiritual institution in nature, its nature does not preclude the existence of outward, visible traits that define and distinguish it from all other institutions. And yet, anti-restoration liberals apparently hold some such view, holding “the church” to be some sort of vaporous, invisible entity—without shape or form and most certainly, without borders.

In fact, Shelly and his fellow-liberal and co-author, Randy Harris, argued as much in their 1992 book, *The Second Incarnation*. According to them, we must ignore Acts and the epistles if we would learn anything about what the church is or should be. We are not to look to Jerusalem, Antioch, Philippi, or anywhere else on the New Testament map for an actual model for the church. Rather, they insist that we learn all about the church in the Gospel accounts. Jesus Himself is the only “paradigm” (a synonym for *pattern*, by the way) for the church (Shelly and Harris).

As essential as it is for us to try to replicate the life of our Lord in ours (1 John 2:6, et al.), this fact has no bearing on the nature, structure, or substance of the church. Even to speak of

“the church” apart from its identification properties is absurd. To attempt to find the church apart from its outward manifestations is as foolhardy (and impossible) as expecting the police to find a stolen car without knowing its make, color, year of manufacture, license number, or how many doors it might have. Given the liberal view of the church, how might one ever know if he had or had not found it or whether he was or was not in it? But when did such little details ever matter to liberals?

Consider the following bases for the claim of present-day restoration:

1. The Old Testament prophets foresaw the establishment of the church under such figures as “the kingdom” and “the mountain of Jehovah’s house” (2 Sam. 7:12–13; Dan. 2:44; Isa. 2:2–3; Mic. 4:1–2). These men did not prophesy some vaporous, imperceptible entity that would not be recognized when it arrived.
2. Jesus preached the “kingdom is at hand” (Mat. 4:17). He told the apostles that they would live to see its coming (Mark 9:1). This statement implies that they would be able to recognize its beginning, which requires the existence of some sort of visible and identifiable properties.
3. When Jesus promised to build His church (Mat. 16:18), the apostles could hardly have thought he was promising to set up a disorganized, unstructured group of people who would merely follow His character traits. Some (especially the apostles) were doing that while the Lord was still on earth. If this were all that it takes to constitute the church, then the church existed before Pentecost. Since the church did not exist before Pentecost, Jesus’ plan for the church clearly involved more than merely having people imitate His character traits.
4. Jesus promised the apostles He would send the Holy Spirit to them, Who would guide them into all the Truth (John 16:13) (we understand the Lord to mean, of course, “all the Truth” relating to man’s religious and personal behavior). Upon receiving it, they were to take this Truth (i.e., the Gospel) into all the world (Mark 16:15). As the Lord ordered them just before His return to Heaven, they were to begin this proclamation when the promised Spirit empowered them to do so (Acts 1:4–8), which occurred on Pentecost (2:1–4).
5. The apostolic Pentecost preaching resulted in the addition of about 3,000 souls to the church (Acts 2:41, 47). Every passage before Pentecost that speaks of the church **anticipates** its coming. From this passage forward, however, the church is in existence, with souls being added to it and congregations of it springing to life wherever the Gospel was preached. The 3,000 did not constitute the church on Pentecost because they began emulating the love, meekness, boldness, and other traits of the Lord’s behavior. Rather, they were added to the church upon their confessed faith in the Lord as God’s Son, repentance of sin, and immersion in water to have their sins washed away in the very blood of Jesus they had demanded to be shed seven weeks earlier (Acts 2:37–38; 22:16; Rev. 1:5; 7:14).
6. From its beginning, the “apostles’ teaching” included the church. They told men both the way to become part of it and what its conduct should be, both when it was assembled and when it was dispersed. Their teaching included vastly more than merely the personal traits of the Lord or some vague, general guidelines for the organization and conduct of the church. The Jerusalem church learned early from the apostles concerning such things as the practice of fellowship, the Lord’s supper, and prayer (Acts 2:42).

7. The message preached by the apostles was/is a distinctive and integrated whole. Thus, in the aggregate, the inspired writers frequently called it “the faith” (Acts 6:7; 13:8; 14:22; 1 Cor. 16:13; Gal. 1:23; 1 Tim. 4:1; Jude 3, et al.). It produced (and produces) a distinctive result—the church—whenever and wherever men and women obeyed/obey it. Those who dare preach or teach anything different from the apostolic Gospel bring upon themselves the Lord’s anathema (Gal. 1:6–9).
8. The Gospel was/is a singular message for all men (Mark 16:15). Consequently, all of the apostles taught the same thing everywhere they went. Paul did not declare different messages to various churches, but taught “the same thing everywhere in every church” (1 Cor. 4:17; cf. 14:33). The churches were composed of men and women who had responded to the same Gospel commands. Members of each congregation were all to speak the same thing and to be of the same judgment in obligatory matters as specified by the Word, and thus be united (1 Cor. 1:10). All of the churches had their assemblies on the same day, worshiped in the same way, were organized in the same way, and were given the same work to do. By this means every congregation was also united with every other congregation. Since the seed (i.e., the Word of God) was consistent, so was the crop of churches it produced.

From all the above, it follows that the inspired record of what the disciples did **as churches** of the Lord’s people demonstrates exactly what the apostles obligated them to do. It also follows that the decrees of the apostles set forth these arrangements and obligations for the church in perpetuity, for the Lord’s will was not to be altered in the least (1 Cor. 4:6; 11:2; Gal. 1:6–9; 1 Pet. 4:11; Rev. 22:18–19, et al.). These practices verily constitute “identifying marks” of the church presented to us from Acts 2:41 through Revelation 3:22, regardless of all of the caterwauling, bawling, screaming, whining, and shrieking the liberal crowd wants to do about it.

When we study closely the congregations, as set up by the apostles, we find the following:

1. The church began in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension (Acts 2:1, 41, 47).
2. The church assembled each first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; Heb. 10:25).
3. In these weekly assemblies they remembered the Lord’s death by partaking of the Lord’s supper (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:17–34).
4. When they met for worship, they sang (not played or hummed) “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” of praise and edification (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).
5. Their meetings were characterized by the preaching of the Word (Acts 20:7).
6. They engaged in prayer to the Father (Acts 2:41; 1 Cor. 14:15–19).
7. They gave of their money according to their prosperity (1 Cor. 16:1–2).
8. Each congregation had its own plurality of elders (if it had men who met the Scriptural qualifications [1 Tim. 3:1–7; Tit. 1:5–9]) to oversee it and keep it faithful to the Word (Acts

20:28; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1–3). Therefore, each congregation was independent of any overarching hierarchy or any other church in its work.

9. Each congregation had deacons (if it had men who met the Scriptural qualifications [1 Tim. 3:8–13]), who served as assistants to and under the elders (Phi. 1:1).
10. Each congregation had the Lord’s mandate to preach to Gospel and save souls according to its opportunities and abilities (Mark 16:15–16).
11. The very Gospel commands (discussed earlier) upon which the Lord added men to the church constitute a distinctive characteristic of the church.

Simply put, the foregoing practices are all external, visible marks of identity of the New Testament church, denials of liberals notwithstanding. When people in this or any other time obey the terms of pardon first issued on Pentecost and then practice these characteristics, they most certainly constitute the church, even as in the first century.

It is not self-righteous or self-serving, but simply factual, to say that faithful churches of Christ here and now constitute the restored church. Does this mean that every building that has *Church of Christ* on it houses a restored church? No, no more than slapping a Cadillac emblem on a Ford makes it a Cadillac. It is quite clear that the day has long since passed when one could rely upon such signs alone. However, the fact that many congregations have strayed into apostasy and have continued to employ a Scriptural designation in no way contradicts the reality that faithful churches yet exist. I have told audiences in unnumbered sermons over the years that the New Testament church exists today and I am a member of it, as they also can be. So say I again.

Conclusion

One will not read very long or very much of what the anti-restoration folk write before discovering the foundation of their denials. As liberals, they chafe at restriction or confinement of what they believe and/or practice (after all, a basic meaning of *liberal* is “free from restraint”). They do not want anyone—including God and His Son—telling them what they may, may not, must, or must not do or say. When one gets down to it, liberalism is merely thinly disguised universalism; liberals cannot bear the thought that the Lord will hold men accountable for what they believe and practice in religion. They cannot visualize the Lord’s saying, “I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Mat. 7:23) to those who professed belief in Him while ignoring or rejecting His Word (v. 21).

That which the current-day liberals in the church (and all professed believers on the outside, I assume) deny, I am pleased to affirm. I have not the slightest hesitation to answer our

title's question: "Yes, the New Testament church has been restored and exists in a restored state in this modern world."

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Endnote

¹ For fuller discussion of the following propositions (as well as other lines of proof), please see my other chapter in this volume and my chapter, "An Expose` of Allen and Hughes' *Illusions of Innocence*," in *Profiles in Apostasy #2*, ed. David P. Brown, Spring, TX: *Contending for the Faith*, 2011.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and I presented a digest of it orally at the Contending for the Faith Lectures, hosted by the Spring, TX, Church of Christ, February 22–26, 2012. It was published in the book of the lectures, *The New Testament Church and Counterfeit Churches*, ed. David P. Brown (Contending for the Faith, Spring, TX)].