

What Is the Restoration Principle, and Is It Scriptural?

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Introduction

Our title is composed of two questions. The first of these seeks definition of the “restoration principle.” Permit me to illustrate this definition by means of an automobile “allegory.” Automobiles have intrigued me since childhood. I learned to drive in a 1938 Ford pickup (it rolled off the assembly line the same year I discovered America). I was 14 years old when my dad signed “hardship” papers for me to get my drivers’ license. I passed my driving test in that 14-year-old truck, and we became congenial companions. We lived on a ranch a few miles north of Burnet, Texas, and Dad often needed something from town or somewhere else when it was not convenient for him to make that drive. That truck surely was nothing fancy, and it was pretty beat up by the time Dad bought it in about 1951. However, I liked it just fine, and I have often fantasized about finding and restoring an old truck of that vintage.

I have done some Internet searches of that model. I found some old rusted-out hulks for sale and some beautiful restorations of those old rattletraps. I also found pictures of many trucks that began as 1938 Ford pickups, but that hardly bore any resemblance to the original because of the additions, renovations, and/or subtractions therefrom. To truly restore that old truck, one would have to go with a V-8 carbureted engine, mechanical brakes, a manual four-speed transmission (with the long stick in the floor), unassisted steering, a bench seat, and all of the other original equipment, because those are things that were in it to begin with.

Owners of those altered trucks had chopped, lowered, and painted them with all sorts of colors and graphics. They had added air conditioning, automatic transmissions, bucket seats, power steering and brakes, and all sorts of other modern gimmicks and gadgets that many of us count as necessities on our modern vehicles. Oh, those show truck street rods are nice to look at and likely a joy to drive, but they were anything but 1938 Ford pickups.

Defining the Restoration Principle

In the foregoing “parable of the pickup” I have **illustrated** the principle of restoration. Now let me state the principle and its implications **explicitly**:

- *Restoration* implies the existence of an original (one cannot restore that which never existed).
- *Restoration* implies the loss of the original state of that which is to be restored.

- *Restoration* implies the existence of information concerning the specifications of the original (pattern, blueprint, model, written description, and/or photos, et al.). The “restoration principle” is the employment of those original specifications to replicate the original – without addition, subtraction, or any other alteration.

The initial question goes beyond the mere principle of restoration in general. Our interest in this study is not the restoration of a truck, a landmark building, or any other material item, but of the religion of Christ. The fuller statement of the question is “What Is the Restoration Principle as It Relates to Religion?” The particulars involved in restoring a 1938 Ford pickup apply equally well to this larger and more significant question. In applying the principle of restoration in the realm of religion, some questions are therefore in order:

- Did God institute a system of religion? The answer is “Yes.” Jesus Christ, the Son of God, promised to build His church, which He immediately identified as His kingdom, and He said death itself could not prevent His doing so (Mat. 16:18-19). His church/kingdom became a reality upon the ascension of Christ to His throne, which fact Peter declared on the first Pentecost after His resurrection (Acts 1:9-10; 2:33-36). Its number increased greatly on that day as about three thousand were baptized and added to it (Acts 2:37-47). Its numerical, geographic, and spiritual growth are recorded throughout the book of Acts and the epistles.
- Was the original state of the church, as established by the Christ through His apostles, lost and corrupted by human innovation? To ask this question is to answer it, because the answer is so obvious. Attempts to alter the original church afflicted it almost from its beginning, as human wills conflicted with the Divine will. The seeds of corruption appeared even in the first century, as evidenced by the great Jerusalem discussion over circumcision (Acts 15), by the epistles to the Corinthians, the Galatians, the Hebrews, and by those written by Peter and Jude. The Lord warned two of the Asian congregations that they had strayed so far from the original as to be in danger of forfeiting their identity and fellowship with Him (Rev. 2:5; 3:16).

Uninspired church history from the second century to the present fills hundreds of volumes, recording the pollutions of the worship, organization, work, and other facets of the original congregations of the church of Christ. That the church Jesus built was and has been all but universally corrupted by innovation and alteration is incontrovertible. Modern religious bodies claiming to honor Christ are nothing more than severe, unrecognizable distortions and travesties when compared with the New Testament institution. (Let us note, however,

that such widespread corruption does not preclude the existence of remnants of disciples who remained faithful throughout the centuries, though forced underground by persecution and generally unrecognized by historians).

- Does information (i.e., pattern, blueprint, model, written description, et al.) exist whereby one may discern the specific nature and appearance of the church as Jesus built it? Indeed it does, which information constitutes the bulk of the New Testament, beginning in Acts 2:42 and continuing through Revelation 22:21. The means of entrance, the day of meeting, the worship activities, the congregational organization, the work, and the destiny of Jesus' church as He established it in the beginning are all set forth in "the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3).

Is the Restoration Principle – as Applied to the Church – Scriptural?

The second question in our title asks if the Restoration Principle is Scriptural. That is, does the New Testament **authorize** this principle? Does Scripture allow or encourage the application of this principle to religion? The answer to this question is so transparent to those who have even a modicum of knowledge of the Bible as to hardly warrant the provision of evidence. Unfortunately, many who read the Bible (and profess to believe what it says) fail to see this truth, whether because of doctrinal bias, superficial study, or unquestioned allegiance to a human religious leader. Not only do the Scriptures authorize, allow, and encourage employment of the restoration principle; they actually **demand** its employment, as we shall see from various New Testament passages and principles. This **mandate**, of course, implies the **possibility** of restoring the purity of doctrine and practice, and the maintenance of that purity once men have restored it.

Some recognize and understand the restoration principle all too well, but deny either the desirability or necessity, and some even the possibility of implementing it in regard to the church. In a 1961 discussion of some Biblical questions and issues with the local Presbyterian preacher, I stressed the need for the church to be the same in the twentieth century as it was in the first century. He replied, "But Dub, we don't need a first-century church; we need a twentieth-century church." Now we have an influential cadre of liberal brethren saying, in deed, if not in actual words, "We don't need a first-century church, we need a twenty-first-century church."

These folk condescendingly and pompously view as simplistic and naïve those who still sound forth the plea for restoration to members of false religious systems. They are willing to speak of “restoration,” but only as a never-ending, never-attainable process and pursuit. They assert, therefore, that those who are not only confident that the church **can** be restored, but that it **has** been restored and **continues** in a restored state, labor under an illusion.

Over the past few decades, such brethren have infested the universities supported by our brethren. They have diverted these schools into new and different paths that directly contradict the dedication to the old paths of their founders. Faithful men began these schools to serve in successive generations as bulwarks against innovation, compromise, and apostasy. Men who disdain these founders and the restoration principle they so much valued have gained control of these schools and have turned them into fertile breeding grounds for apostasy. Not only are they contemptuous of restoration because they see neither need for nor possibility of it. As they view things, they cannot afford to champion restoration, for to do so would antagonize their denominational academic peers, whose acceptance they seem to treasure above that of the Lord Himself.

Substantiation that the Scriptures Authorize the Restoration Principle

The Function of the Mosaic-Age Prophets¹

When God gave the law to and through Moses, He demanded that Israel comply with it fully (He gave ten **commandments**, not ten recommendations or suggestions). Had He not so demanded, there would have been little or no purpose for delivering it. The following statement by Moses is representative of scores, if not hundreds of similar statements that illustrate the reverence God expected of Israel for His law:

Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish from it, that ye may keep the commandments of Jehovah your God which I command you (Deu. 4:2).

Moses strictly charged the Hebrew parents to teach their children constantly and diligently to obey the law of God (6:6–9). Moses warned Israel repeatedly lest they apostatize after they settled in Canaan. As Joshua neared his appointment with death, he warned God’s people “to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, that ye turn not aside therefrom to the right hand or to the left” (Jos. 23:6). They followed Joshua’s charge, but only for a while before apostasy became the norm:

And the people served Jehovah all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of Jehovah that he had wrought for Israel....

And also all that generation were gathered unto their fathers: and there arose another generation after them, that knew not Jehovah, nor yet the work which he had wrought for Israel (Jud. 2:7, 10).

Israel went through numerous cycles of apostasy, repentance, and rescue by God-ordained judges, until they demanded (and God gave them) a king. With few exceptions, either before or after the kingdom divided (none in the northern kingdom), the kings led the people deeper into idolatrous and immoral corruption.

Almost a millennium after the days of Moses, God stated the following to Jeremiah:

Since the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt unto this day, I have sent unto you all my servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them: yet they hearkened not unto me, nor inclined their ear, but made their neck stiff: they did worse than their fathers (Jer. 7:25–26).

For what purpose did God send prophet upon prophet to His people, unless to call them back to His law – to admonish them to **restore** God’s way from which they had departed – or else? It is evident that God believed in the **desirability**, **essentiality**, and therefore the **attainability** of restoring His Old Testament religion, because He **mandated** it.

Josiah's God-ordained Restoration (2 Kin. 21–23; 2 Chr. 34–35)

Josiah was one of the precious few righteous Judean kings, often called “The Restorer King.” Had liberal brethren been around when he reigned, they would doubtless have made great sport of his efforts, even as they and their ilk do concerning present-day restorers. It is not difficult to imagine the way they would have ridiculed righteous Josiah:

Attack and destroy the false religions, publicly commit yourself to obeying God’s Word, clean up and repair the temple, and reinstitute the passover? Who do you think you are to do what your fathers never attempted? Don’t you know you will be opposing almost the whole nation? Don’t you understand how extreme and radical your plan is? Don’t you see how the religions around us will ridicule us as “narrow” and “judgmental” when they hear you declare that there is only one true religion? Don’t you realize you cannot actually restore true religion once it is lost, and that any restoration you think you accomplish will only be an illusion?

Josiah knew no better than to believe he could restore worship and service to God in Judah just as God had established His religion from the time He gave the law to Moses and strictly commanded their fathers to obey it.

Rather than seeking to dissuade Josiah, God delighted in the restoration he wrought, narrow and exclusive though his efforts were. At the beginning of his reign, inspiration provides the following preview assessment of his restoration efforts:

And he did that which was right in the eyes of Jehovah, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left (2 Kin. 22:2).

Well into Josiah's restoration work, the inspired writer evaluated him thus:

And like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to Jehovah with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him (2 Kin. 23:25).

Josiah's work of restoration was manifestly "right in the eyes of Jehovah," as has been the same effort of Godly men and women in every age and as it continues to be to this moment. It involves steering a steady course in the way of Truth, alert to avoid the errors of lawmakers on one hand and of law-breakers on the other. It involves constantly asking, "Is this according to — authorized by — the law of God" (Col. 3:17)? The two accounts of Josiah's efforts conclusively demonstrate that he wrought a **real restoration** in Judah, not merely the illusion of one.

If true religion could be (and was) restored almost nine centuries after God gave the law through Moses, then true religion, as established by Christ, can also be restored centuries after His church has fallen victim to the corruptions, philosophies, and traditions of men. Furthermore, God will always have it so.

God Is a God of Patterns

Perhaps the only thing liberals despise as much as being called "narrow-minded" by their denominational buddies is for someone to insist that God is a God of patterns. In making sport of "patternism" and "patternists," however, they make sport of God's Word, which contains numerous God-given patterns. In the final analysis, all such outcries constitute rebellion against God's limitations of human behavior, whether in religion or morals, which all liberals find odious. These protests are, in fact, against God Himself.

He had a pattern of behavior for Adam and Eve in Eden and a pattern of worship for Cain and Abel and the other patriarchs. He gave Noah a pattern for the ark. The Mosaic system is a manifold pattern composed of scores of sub-patterns. The Hebrews writer asserts this truth in calling attention to the typical nature of the Mosaic priesthood and tabernacle. Those priests, he said

... serve that which is a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, even as Moses is warned of God when he is about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern that was showed thee in the mount (Heb. 8:5).

This passage refers to the very detailed “blueprint” God gave Moses for building the tabernacle, its furniture, and its appurtenances (Exo. 25–27). Not once, but twice, God ordered Moses to build all things “according to the pattern” He supplied (Exo. 25:40; 26:30).

The mention of the tabernacle by the Hebrews writer was not to urge the Hebrew saints to revert to that defunct Old Testament pattern and rebuild (restore) its tabernacle. Contrariwise, he mentioned it to further his argument to these Jewish brethren **against** reverting to the obsolete Mosaic system that centered first on the tabernacle and then on the temple.

Throughout most of this epistle one finds the running argument that Christ and His New Testament are vastly superior to the Mosaic system out of which they came, and that in Christ alone—not in Moses—is there salvation. The statement in Hebrews 8:5 is an important part of the author’s argument, which may be framed in the familiar *if-then* formula:

If God had a pattern for the inferior institution (the tabernacle) of the Law of Moses (which He did [Heb. 8:5]), **then** it follows that He has a pattern for the superior institution (the church) of the law of His Son.

That the aim of the inspired writer is to argue from the lesser to the greater is not a matter of speculation, for he immediately tells us so. In reference to Christ, as the head of His New Testament religion (summed up in the church) he stated:

But now hath he obtained a ministry the more excellent, by so much as he is also the mediator of a better covenant, which hath been enacted upon better promises (v. 6).

It is neither logical nor Biblical to conclude that, while God had an unalterable pattern for the tabernacle, when it came to His church, Jesus allowed men to construct it and include in it whatever pleased them.

The Hebrews letter also emphasized the fact that God demands strict adherence to the patterns of the law of His Son, just as He did to the patterns of the law of Moses:

For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great a salvation...? (2:2–3a).

A man that hath set at nought Moses law dieth without compassion on the word of two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment, think ye, shall he be judged worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? (10:28–29).

Again, the *if-then* formula serves to apply the foregoing passages:

If God was so concerned about strict adherence to His pattern for the inferior Law of Moses and its institutions (which He was [Heb. 2:2-3a; 10:28]), **then** He is even more concerned about strict adherence to His pattern for the superior Law of His son (including the church) (Heb. 10:29).

That God has a pattern for the church as surely as he had a pattern for the tabernacle is undeniable. As one traces the establishment of various congregations and the descriptions of their identity from Pentecost through the epistles, one sees a pattern of the terms upon which men became members of the church, when the church assembled, the way the church worshiped in its assemblies, the work that it did and the way it did it, and the way the congregations were organized.

The *pattern* concept, embedded in Scripture concerning the church, liberals find to be particularly irksome – and the reason is obvious. They understand that if they admit the existence of a pattern, they thereby admit the possibility of following such to restore the church when apostasy corrupts it. After all, the fundamental **purpose** of a pattern is to provide the means to duplicate the original. Furthermore, if a pattern for the church exists and the church is restored, once restored, faithful saints can maintain it in its restored state by persistent adherence to the pattern. Therefore, liberals must deny that God has a pattern for His church – that He cares about entrance requirements, worship (acts and/or day of assembly), organization, or any other element pertaining to it. While **they** do not care about such matters, God most certainly does care because **He is the ultimate “patternist.”**

Implications of Personal Restorations

When brethren stray from the Lord’s way, is it desirable, necessary, or possible to restore such? Does not the call for repentance imply the call for restoration? Unless one adheres to a *once-an-apostate, always-an-apostate* doctrine (a peculiar twist on Calvin’s *perseverance of the saints* error), one must give an affirmative answer to the foregoing questions. Restoring fallen brethren is **desirable** for many reasons (e.g., the Lord loves them and died for their salvation, we love their souls and want them to be saved, their abilities, influence, and resources need to be claimed for the kingdom, etc.). Most of all, restoring the fallen is **necessary** if they are to be saved (Jam. 5:19-20; Jude 22-23). We are therefore commanded to do our best to restore them, and restoring brethren who fall away is **possible**, at least in some cases (Gal. 6:1), although not all can be persuaded to repent (Heb. 6:4-6).

If one brother who strays can be restored, can two be restored to original faithfulness (not merely an “illusion” of it)? What if a church of two hundred members has apostatized? Is it

desirable and necessary to seek its restoration? Is it **possible** to achieve its restoration? Does not the possibility of the restoration of one or two apostate brethren imply the possibility of the restoration of an entire congregation that goes astray? Does not the necessity of restoring one brother who strays imply the necessity of restoring an entire religious body that becomes corrupt if it is to be saved? If all religion becomes apostate, cannot true religion be restored even as the individual apostate brother or congregation can be restored?

Implications of New Testament Demands for Doctrinal Purity

To deny that men can take the New Testament and reproduce the New Testament church in any age is tantamount to denying that men who originally possessed the New Testament (in the persons of inspired men first, then gradually in print) did so in the first century. What they did then, men can do now or ten thousand years from now if the Lord delays His return.

If restoration is unnecessary, what is the purpose of the relentless emphasis of the profusion of passages that call men to revere and submit to the will of the Christ? The incessant emphasis on strict adherence to the Word of God and the relentless warnings about departing therefrom all argue *restoration* when men go astray in religion.

Those baptized upon believing the Gospel were to be taught all of the Lord's commands, and not just in that first generation, but "to the end of the world" (Mark 16:15-16; Mat. 28:19-20). These passages further demonstrate powerfully that the Lord has a pattern for His religion and that He intends for men to follow it. If the foregoing is not plain enough, Paul's instruction to Timothy should be:

And the things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also (2 Tim. 2:2).

The Son of God intended that men of every generation should hand down the pure Gospel to every succeeding generation without interruption or corruption. All of the Lord's people are under Divine mandate to speak and even think alike in obligatory matters, which demands that we can both understand and adhere to His requirements (1 Cor. 1:10). Our Savior apparently has a pattern for His church, otherwise He would not have inspired Paul to teach the same message "everywhere in every church" (4:17). We remain under the mandate Paul wrote to Timothy, namely to "charge...men not to teach a different doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:3).

There are various man-made, perverted “gospels,” but there is not another Gospel of and from Christ. Whoever (be he angel, apostle, or any other man) preaches any “gospel” besides that of the New Testament is under the curse of God (Gal. 1:6–9). It is not only possible to recognize and be obedient to “the faith,” but we are also required to “contend earnestly” for it (Acts 6:7; Jude 3).

The Seed Principle

In His parable of the sower, Jesus likened the heart-conditions of various men to various kinds of soils (Luke 8:4–8). He identified the “seed” in the parable as the Word of God (v. 11). “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” is invariable from the beginning in both physical and spiritual matters (Gen. 1:11–12; Gal. 6:7). If men preach and practice the same Gospel the apostles preached and practiced, it will produce the same religious body in any age. If men cannot establish the apostolic church in post-apostolic times, it can only be because they no longer have the same Gospel seed, they can find no receptive soil, or they are unwilling to sow it. It is difficult to avoid the implication of those who deny the possibility of restoration that they do not believe we have the pure seed, the pure Gospel. If we have the same seed we can produce the same plant.

Conclusion

Some denials of the possibility of restoration may be rooted in a more fundamental denial—denial that men can arrive at an accurate understanding of New Testament Truth; they must ever be in pursuit of it, but never attaining it. Such men should never refer to the New Testament as a “revelation,” for by implication they believe its message is so clouded in ambiguity as to be incomprehensible. To them, any who profess that they can know or understand it are “arrogant,” “presumptuous,” and “boastful,” notwithstanding Jesus’ clarion statement: “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). Numerous statements in the Gospel make it clear that men can understand and know its message (Acts 2:36; Rom. 16:25–27; 1 Cor. 3:7–10; Eph. 3:3–4; Col. 1:26–27; et al.).

It may be, however, that anti-restoration liberals very well know that men are capable of understanding the meaning of God’s Word and can arrive at true conclusions regarding it. In line with their denominational compatriots, they **have decided that God does not mean what He says.**² This being so, their contention that it is impossible to restore the church is merely a

camouflage claim. Behind that mask, they understand the Word all too well; their real conviction is that **it just does not matter**.

The “restoration principle” is nothing more than faithful fulfillment of the great commission, the authority behind which is from Him Who has all authority (Mat. 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–16).

Endnotes

1. Much of the material in the remainder of this chapter is similar to material by the author, previously published in *Profiles in Apostasy #2*, ed. David P. Brown, Contending for the Faith: Spring, TX, 2011, pp. 21–29.
2. This hypothesis fits well with the denial of the Biblical doctrine of eternal torment in Hell (i.e., “annihilationism”) by some renowned brotherhood liberals (e.g., Edward Fudge, F. LaGard Smith, John Clayton, et al.).

[**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 (Spring, TX: Contending for the Faith).]

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