

A Plea for The Plea

Dub McClish

There is no more exciting and thrilling ideal to those who hunger and thirst for ultimate Truth than that of being a part of the church of the Bible. The incomparable objective of restoring the church of Christ was necessitated by centuries of apostasy followed by earnest but doomed-to-fail attempts at mere correction of the evil monster of Rome and its apostate ancestors. The mighty sixteenth-century reform effort itself degenerated into another version of rampant abandonment of the inspired blueprint, resulting in as much deviation in religion as it sought to repair.

The sparks of restoration have likely always been present in the face of digression. They can certainly be seen in eighth century “Publicans” (England) and “Paulicians” (Europe) who generally rejected the doctrine of the Roman Church and the growing power of the pope. Strong traces of a determination to subscribe only to the New Testament are evident in the intervening centuries through the times of the reformers. There were restoration voices as loud in protest to the false doctrines of Luther and Calvin as to those of the pope. Some of the reformers (e.g., Calvin) were as adept as the papists at inflicting torture and death on many of their enemies.

More recent voices of restoration were heard from such eighteenth-century men as John Glas, Robert Sandeman, and the Haldanes, in Scotland. About the same time the ideal appeared in our fledgling nation as devout men in the New World became heart-weary with human tradition and uninspired religious dogma. James O’Kelley broke with the Methodists, Abner Jones and Elias Smith with the Baptists, and Barton W. Stone with the Presbyterians in their determination to be only the Lord’s people. Later came the Campbells and others at the beginning of the nineteenth century, all of whom had to grope (and sometimes stumble) – gradually and painfully – their way out of the dark tunnel of error into the glorious light of Truth.

While these men understandably made mistakes as they pursued their quest, their passion for the primitive pattern was unmistakable and resolute. They knew that the unity and freedom they craved in religion could and would come only as men were persuaded to cast aside all human religious doctrines and practices so as to walk in the old paths set down for all time by the inspired writers. Their plea was not for a new way of their own origin, but for the old, original way of the Lord. Borne along by such Bible-rooted revolutionary slogans as

“Where the Bible speaks, we speak, and where the Bible is silent, we are silent” and “Let us call Bible things by Bible names and do Bible things in Bible ways,” these men used the fire in their own bones to ignite a spiritual blaze that caught fire and rapidly spread.

While many of those heralding this exciting plea were unlettered and had only tree stumps for their frontier wilderness pulpits, still their message with its innate power and verity found its mark time after time. In its wake the denominational authorities quaked as they saw their sects being rapidly consumed. Though they tried mightily to resist on polemic platform and by printed page, the powerful two-edged sword of the Spirit slew them hip and thigh, time and again. Those godly restorers had the Lord of glory and His Truth among them; how could they fail?

By the middle of the nineteenth century, when it appeared that the pure Gospel and the church that it has ever produced would literally sweep our young nation, disaster struck. That which the subtle Serpent could not do by frontal attack from without, he determined to do through treason from within Christ’s kingdom. Some who had escaped the spiritual shackles of sectarianism, like Lot’s wife, began to look backward with longing and lust for some of the very things from which the Truth had freed them. In their desire to substitute missionary societies for the church’s evangelistic commission and to add man-made musical instruments to the worship, they found it necessary to abandon the respect they once had for the silence as well as for the statement of Scripture.

To justify their innovation idols, they invented a deadly new slogan: “Where the Bible is silent we have freedom to act and speak.” Predictably, this flawed dictum not only allowed them to rationalize their cravings, but sadly, it also opened a Pandora’s Box. By the principle upon which they began fulfilling their new desires for things not explicitly forbidden in the New Testament, everything else not explicitly forbidden might also be justified, from doughnuts and milk on the Lord’s table to counting beads in prayer.

The defectors relentlessly and ruthlessly followed the “prince of this world” to the distraction, decimation, and finally the division of the church of Christ, officially recognized by the federal census near the beginning of the past century (1906). They could boast of capturing about eighty-five percent of the church’s members in their cruel campaign. Their efforts have resulted in two separate Christian Church denominations, with even the less liberal of them still inseparably wedded to the utterly unscriptural motto of their spiritual forebears that reflects their contempt for the silence of Scripture.

The small remnant of faithful brethren had to start new congregations, build new buildings, and establish new schools because most of the schools and churches, with their respective properties, were rudely stolen from those who had poured so much of their lives and fortunes into them. Within a few decades, the faithful had more than regained the ground lost to the apostates. In the 1950s, the Lord's people were the most rapidly growing religious body in the U.S. As a century before, it appeared that the future was only bright for the progress of Truth in our nation. Then Satan seemed to reflect on his earlier success with an internal attack; history began to repeat itself. First, there arose some brethren who were determined to bind optional matters as obligatory, in both evangelistic and benevolent works. In spite of refutation of their doctrine in numerous debates, sermons, and discussions through the papers, they attracted considerable numbers to their cause. Perhaps to some degree in reaction to an unbiblical restrictive agenda of these brethren, in the 1960s, another group of brethren with an equally unbiblical platform began to appear. They, in the footsteps of the digressives of the mid-nineteenth century, pursued an unrestrictive agenda that insisted on making various Scriptural obligations optional.

This latter group of brethren is in fact so much like those who began their leftward movement a century and a half ago that they have been steadily urging a reunification with the denominations those erstwhile brethren became. The current crop of digressives has pursued a much broader agenda than the introduction of the two prized innovations of their religious fathers, however. These self-denominated change agents have totally abandoned the plea for maintenance of the restored church.

They, much as the Disciples of Christ/Christian Church denomination, deny both the possibility and the need for restoration. They attribute our distinctiveness as a religious body to the philosopher John Locke and some of his influence on the early nineteenth-century restorers rather than to the apostles. But they are wrong.

These present-day liberal brethren are members of a "movement" – one bent on destroying the church of Christ by denominationalizing it. I am not a member of a "movement" (and I wish brethren would refrain from equating the Lord's church with a "Restoration Movement"). I am a member of the church of Christ because I obeyed the Gospel of Christ and the Lord added me to His church (Acts 2:38-41, 47). Anyone anywhere anytime can (and will) become a member of the church bought, built, and owned by Christ when he/she confesses faith in the Sonship of Christ, repents of sins, and is baptized into Christ in order to receive the

forgiveness of sins by the blood of Christ. When such ones in any locality then worship, work, and are content to be organized into a congregation as specified in the New Testament, they constitute a church of Christ.

The plea to all men to become and be only Christians as defined by the New Testament is the message of the Gospel itself. The uncorrupted seed of the Word of God (Luke 8:11) can produce only one fruit when it produces at all: the church of Christ. This is the beautiful, simple plea that must and will never grow old to those who have discovered and obeyed the Gospel Truth and to those honest hearts who are searching for it. In a day characterized by apostasy and digression on every hand, may those of us who are in the Way not waver for one moment. Rather, let us all redouble our efforts to sound forth the plea of the pure and primitive Gospel, which alone will produce the pure and primitive church.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and it was published in a slightly different form as an “Editorial Perspective” in *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, January 2000, of which I was Editor at the time.]

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