

"Movement in Transition"

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Some time ago an announcement in the bulletin of a large (1,000+ member) West Texas "Church of Christ" caught my eye. The church had planned a special summer series of Wednesday night lectures on the theme, "Movement in Transition: A Vision for the Future." The accompanying description of the series stated:

According to many, our Restoration Movement is very much in the midst of a period of transition. Many of our churches are struggling with their identity, their mission, and their purpose. Scripture as well as church history teach us that we are only one generation away from apostasy.

While this description makes some factual observations, its wording also demonstrates a mentality that is both spiritually disastrous and that is all too common in the church nowadays. Since this situation is representative of what has happened (and is happening) in various locales, I deem it worthy of some critique and commentary.

"Our Restoration Movement"

This phrase, *our Restoration Movement*, if it is not sectarian, at least borders on being so. Some of the avant-garde liberals in the church today have even come up with an acronym — ARM — to stand for "American Restoration Movement." This is the broad umbrella under which they tuck the ultra-liberal and modernistic Disciples of Christ Christian Churches and the less-liberal Independent Christian Churches — and us, the churches of Christ. The two branches of the Christian Church denomination have digressed so far that they cannot seriously claim thirty-second cousinhood to those spiritual pioneers who began pleading for the restoration of primitive Christianity in the nineteenth century.

Yes, the liberals among us are making every effort to move us under that same umbrella with these denominations in their passion to convert the Lord's church into a mere denomination among denominations. ACU professor, Doug Foster, has for some time been a leader in such attempts. The Woodmont Hills Church, Nashville, Tennessee, financially supports the "World Convention," which favors the union of all three groups mentioned above. The continuing "Unity Forums" are nothing more than glad-handing conventions designed to dissolve all barriers between these groups and "love" them all into one ARM lump. They are all willing to ignore all of the extreme doctrinal and practical diversity as inconsequential.

A great irony in all of this is that neither of the two denominations mentioned above (nor the liberals in the church) even believe in restoration. Some believe it is impossible, while

others believe it is at least impractical, if not unnecessary. (“We don’t need a first century church; we need a twenty-first century church.”) Some believe both—it is impossible **and** unnecessary. Yet they like to hold on to the term *restoration* as if by just using the term they are thereby exempted from being restorers. *Restoration Movement* seems to have almost become a mantra to these folk, none of whom have the least inkling or appreciation of its spiritual implications. In the same vein, the liberals who are determined to stay in the restored church seem determined to use the designation *church of Christ*, all the while eschewing the Scriptural nature, worship, and work of the church. All such behavior is hypocrisy, duplicity, and deception gone to seed.

“The Restoration Movement” has apparently become the end itself with many. These folk are so dedicated to the historical phenomenon of “The Movement” that they have abandoned any concern for faithfully preaching the Gospel—the only means of restoring and/or perpetuating the primitive church. We (as they **claim** to) admire and profit much from the work of faithful Gospel preachers of nineteenth century USA. However, their admiration of these men is not for the Truth and the plea they heralded, often at great sacrifice, but for the “historical movement” these men spawned.

Their aim is to restore their warped concept of “The Restoration Movement,” rather than the church of the Lord. These liberals salivate over their own mere historical **name-association** with the efforts of the pioneers, rejecting the Truth they taught. For example, the Disciples are proud to be called “Campbellites,” claiming A. Campbell as the founder of their denomination. (Some of “our” liberals have come very close to making this same sad affirmation about the church, if they have not already done so.) Such an attitude actually denies the very premise of the plea for restoration the pioneer preachers uttered—**undenominational Christianity**, which struck—and strikes—at the very heart of the modern ARM sectarianism.

Contrariwise, our interest must not be in mere historical aspects of the Campbells, Stone, Smith, McGarvey, Lipscomb, and others (though their lives and work are fascinating history), but in the Truth they preached that resulted in restoring the church of Christ. Only as we preach that same Truth from the same Book can we honestly claim affinity with their efforts. Even so, our real agreement is not with that for which they stood, per se, but with the message they preached **because, and in so far as, it was the message of the New Testament.**

A Movement “in Transition”

The article quoted above observes that “our Restoration Movement is...in...transition” and that “our churches are struggling with their identity, their mission, and their purpose.” This statement reflects an indisputable fact, and little wonder that this is so. The bulletin in which this statement appeared was published by a congregation that has for over three decades been moving steadily leftward in doctrine and practice. The preachers and preaching it has tolerated (yea, encouraged and demanded) would have created an “identity crisis” for any body of people that claims to be a church of Christ. The direction these folk have so long pursued constitutes denial of the Scriptural identity, mission, and purpose the Lord sets forth for His church. For years there has been little more to identify this religious body as a “Church of Christ” than the sign in front of the building.

Now another great irony: Among the five named speakers for this series of lectures to speak on the “identity crisis” in various congregations, at least three of them were men who have helped precipitate this very crisis by their well-known soft and indistinct doctrinal posture for several years. The other two on the program had hardly distinguished themselves as pillars of doctrinal strength. At least the five men named ought to know something about these problems, because their part in causing them. To invite such men to address problems relating to “transitions” and “identity crises” in the church is comparable to inviting the wolves into the henhouse to help nurse the sick chickens back to health.

“One Generation...from Apostasy”

That the church is only one generation away from apostasy is hardly a new revelation, nor is it arguable. But here is perhaps the most ironic irony – that an apostate church would feign concern that the church is one generation away from apostasy! This church is a grand demonstration of this apostasy adage. To fully appreciate this irony, consider the fact that before 1970:

- The elders of this church had allowed a man to say from the pulpit, without being challenged or corrected, that he could not tell young people it was a sin to use instruments of music in worship or that they should not smoke.
- These elders defended a man they supported in Africa in the face of indisputable evidence that he was advocating Pentecostal doctrine and that he admittedly admired Pat Boone’s defection to that sect.
- These elders had a preacher who thought it was fine for his daughters to attend their high school prom.

- Some of these elders protected and praised their college age young people who publicly advocated Pentecostal views of the work of the Holy Spirit concerning miracles and rebuked one who dared refute their doctrine before the same assembly.
- These elders allowed a “worship committee” to dictate that the worship schedule would so change and vary every Lord’s day that it took a printed program for worshipers to know what to expect next.
- These elders were allowing this worship committee to introduce...
 1. the denominational practice of responsive readings,
 2. singing during the Lord’s Supper,
 3. the use of three “sermonettes” (on an inane theme selected by the committee) in place of a Gospel sermon.
- This same committee was allowed to attempt to dispense with an invitation and an invitation song.

The youngsters in this congregation, even some years before the lectures were conducted, hardly had a chance to escape apostasy unless they acquired from some other source sufficient wisdom and respect for the Bible to rebel against what they had been taught. Their parents, elders, and most of their preachers were already firmly committed to that course.

The only thing that might not be altogether true in the apostasy proverb is the one generation time element. Events of recent years have demonstrated that apostasy can occur much more rapidly. Sometimes one man in a leadership position (preacher, elders, wealthy member) who goes astray can have sufficient influence to corrupt a once-faithful congregation in only a few months’ time.

Let us ever be concerned with the **principle** of restoration and with perpetuating and protecting the restored New Testament church and scheme of redemption. While admiring the men who blazed the trails at great cost to call men back to the church of the Bible almost two centuries ago, let us ever remember that they were mere men and that our faith is not in them or in a “movement.” Our faith must be in the Master and the message they preached to the best of their abilities. Let us follow those good men as, and only as, they followed the Christ, as Paul instructed concerning his own words and deeds (1 Cor. 11:1).

[**Note:** I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the August 2003 issue of *The Gospel Journal*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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