Restoration Movement

History, Beliefs, and Practices

Identity: The general term "restoration movement" refers to "a tendency, in Christianity, to turn away from established churches and to seek to 'restore' what is taken to be primitive original Christianity."[1] The term is sometimes used interchangeably with "primitivism": "the impulse to restore the primitive or original order of things as revealed in Scripture, free from accretions of church history and tradition."[2]

"Restoration Movement" as an historical term refers to the 19th century American religious movement that sought church reform according to New Testament patterns. This movement began out of a commitment to biblical authority and church unity.[3] Emerging from it were the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Churches of Christ.

Founder(s): Associated with the founding of the "Restoration Movement" in America are names such as: James O'Kelly (1757-1826), Abner Jones (1772-1841), Elias Smith (1769-1846), Barton Stone (1772-1844); Thomas Campbell (1763-1854); Alexander Campbell (1788-1866). Included in the general category of "restorationism" is a group such as the International Churches of Christ (Boston Movement),[4] whose founder is Kip McKean.

Statistics: See web sites of individual groups mentioned for statistical information.

History: The "Restorationist Movement" as an American religious movement began in the late 18th and early 19th centuries with the activities of individual preachers who became disenchanted with the denominational groups to which they belonged and their religious formalism.[5] They regarded denominations as man-made and called for the replication or recovery of the church of the New Testament. In the 1790s James O'Kelly, an Irish immigrant, broke from the Methodist Episcopal Church, preferring the simple name "Christians." Abner Jones and Elias Smith separated from their Baptist associations and joined with the O'Kelly group in 1811. Among the more well-known "restorationists" were Barton Stone, and Thomas and Alexander Campbell. Barton Stone, of Presbyterian background, left the Presbyterian church and gathered followers who took the name "Christian." They insisted on local church autonomy and claimed devotion to the cause of Christian unity. The Campbells came to America from Ireland in the early 1800s and founded the "Campbellite movement," having left early associations with Baptists after a disagreement regarding the concept of baptism "for the remission of sins." Alexander Campbell's group came to be known as the "Disciples of Christ." Barton Stone's people, calling themselves the "Christian Church," then joined with the Campbells' group in 1831. In the early part of the 20th century a split occurred between these groups over the use of musical instruments in worship and over the formation of mission societies (regarded by some as unbiblical, since they are not mentioned in the Bible). These two groups were the "Christian Church" (Disciples of Christ) and the "Churches of Christ" (Noninstrumental). In 1927 conservatives, in response to liberal views of Scripture,

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[1] John Bowker, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 812.
[2] *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 940.
[3] See Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 238.
[4] See evaluation of the International Churches of Christ at LCMS' Commission on Theology and Church Relations' [CTCR] site at: http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/The%20International%20Churches%20of%20Christ%20ICOC.pdf
[5] See Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 176, 231.

formed an independent group called "Christian Church/Churches of Christ." Confusion has resulted, even today, as to which strand of restorationism local churches represent. [6]

Other groups, as well, have explained as their reason for existence the restoration of a pristine Christianity (for example, the Local Church movement, otherwise known as the Two by Two's or Cooneyites).[7]

Texts: Barton Stone's *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*; Alexander Campbell's periodicals *Christian Baptist* (1823-30) and *Millennial Harbinger* (1830-1866)

Beliefs and Practices

In their effort to "restore" Christianity to its primitive and original condition Christian restorationists call for a return to the bare facts of the Bible ("Back to the Bible," the common plea) and to Christian unity present in the early church. The church, it was typically held, should stress only what all Christians hold in common and should suppress all divisive doctrines and practices.[8] To achieve unity the church must be free from accretions of church history and tradition. Since all creeds are human expansions, constructions or opinions *about* the Bible (not biblical doctrine itself), they divide Christendom and must be rejected. In fact, some restorationists have held that the spirit of the New Testament rules out any attempt at formulating a statement of even such central teachings as the Trinity or the person and work of Christ.[9] Since ecclesiastical traditions, including institutional organizational structures, also divide they need to be discarded in favor of a return to the simple practices of the early church. Denominational identifications are unbiblical, as well, and are of human origin.[10] Typically, restorationists refer to themselves as "Christians only," saying, "We have no creed but Christ, no book but the Bible, no name but the name Christian."[11]

In many of the groups claiming to be a part of the Restoration Movement, the Lord's Supper is celebrated weekly, presided over by a layperson. They are committed to believer's baptism by immersion (sometimes initially by submersion in a river, stream, or lake),[12] opposing the "unbiblical" practice of infant baptism.[13] As noted earlier above, restorationist groups have disagreed on the form of public worship. Some more "conservative" adherents have rejected the use of musical instruments in worship services.

A Lutheran Response

While it is not possible in this brief format to respond to the various teachings of individuals and churches involved in the Restoration Movement, certain foundational assumptions of the movement require comment from a Lutheran theological perspective.

The anti-creedalism of restorationist churches reflects a deficient understanding of the nature and purpose of Christian creeds. By its very nature, a creed is the church's (not merely an individual's) public declaration or acknowledgement of the faith or doctrine already contained in the Holy Scriptures of the Old

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[6] The historical summary given here relies on J. B. North's article in the *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (1005-1008). See also Richard T. Hughes and R. L. Roberts, *The Churches of Christ* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001) and Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996).
[7] See J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1999), 523-25.
[8] F. E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 373.
[9] *Ibid.*, 374.
[10] See www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restoration_Movement , 2.
[11] Article by Robert Mallett, "What Do You Mean, Restoration Movement?" at www.thecra.org/restmovement.html , 1.
[12] Wikipedia, 1 (see note 8).
[13] Mark Noll, *America's God,* 242.

and New Testaments. As even the etymology of the Greek word most often translated "confess" in the New Testament suggests, when believers confess the content of what is revealed to them by God they "speak back to" Him what He has first spoken to them.[14] Rudimentary creeds or creedal statements are already present in the Bible itself (Deut. 6:4-9; Deut. 26:5-9; John 1:41; Acts 8:37; Rom. 10:9; John 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13). For Christians today this means that creeds are nothing more or less than an exposition and acknowledgement of what they have heard God speak to them in the Scriptures. Creeds are not, by their very nature—as some might claim—the imposition of human formulations upon the Bible. It is possible, of course, that creedal statements may *not* be drawn from or faithful to the Scriptures. That is why it is important to emphasize that the Holy Scriptures are the sole norm (*sola scriptura,* "Scripture alone") for all that is confessed and taught in the church. Although creeds are drawn from and based upon the Scriptures, they are not on a par with the Scriptures but are under them and are to be continually tested by them. The primary purpose of all creedal statements is praise to God in glad response to the revelation of His saving Name. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, "Through him (Jesus Christ) then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge (Greek: *homologeō,* "confess") his name."

The kind of "Back to the Bible" appeal present in restorationist groups often reflects a deficient understanding or appreciation of the central purpose and content of all of Scripture, and of the role of the church's confession in interpreting the Scripture. Lutherans believe that the heart, center, and ultimate message of the entire inspired and inerrant Scripture is that God wishes to be gracious to sinners for Christ's sake. The Gospel is the center of the Scriptures and everything in them is related to the Gospel. As St. Paul taught, "For whatever [Greek: *hosa*-"everything that"] was written in former days was written for our instruction that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). Any view that tends to regard the Bible principally, or even merely, as a repository of facts or unrelated string of doctrines (a form of biblicism) fails sufficiently to grasp its vibrant content and center—namely, the message of grace for sinners in Jesus Christ. For Lutherans the confessional writings contained in *The Book of Concord* (which includes the ancient ecumenical creeds—the Apostles' Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds), since they are normed by the Scriptures, help the church to interpret and proclaim the Scripture purely and rightly and to avoid error.[15]

The appeal for unity in the church by restorationists, in the Lutheran view, often reveals a naïve understanding of the state of the early church, of the biblical basis for external unity, and of nature and role of church polity. Contrary to popular perception, at no period of its history did the external church enjoy some kind of pristine, idyllic unity free of divisions.[16] While the invisible church of Christ (His body) is perfectly one and has no divisions (Eph. 4:4-6), the New Testament itself already reveals that divisions caused by false teaching and moral laxity existed and required apostolic admonition and correction (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:10-17; Galatians 1). Moreover, the basis for external unity in the church is agreement in the faith taught in the Scripture and confessed by the church (1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 2:19; Gal. 2:9; Acts 2:42).[17] The church is required by its Lord to be faithful to all that He has taught (Matt. 28:20). It is not required that the church agree in matters of polity or external structure, which remain in the realm of Christian liberty. Nor ought it to be taught or implied that replication of a supposed early New Testament "form" of Christian corporate life is divinely mandated.

For Further Reading

Blankman, Drew and Todd Augustine, eds. *Pocket Dictionary of North America Denominations.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004 (29-33).

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[14] The word *homologeō* occurs at: Mt.7:23; 10:32; 14:7; Luke 12:8; John 1:20; 9:22; 12:42; Acts 7:17; 23:8; 24:14; Rom. 10:9, 10; 1 Tim. 6:12; Tit. 1:16; Heb. 11:13; 13:15; 1 John 1:9; 2:23; 4:2, 3, 15; 2 John 7; Rev. 3:5.

[15] See the 1972 report of the LCMS' Commission on Theology and Church Relations [CTCR] *Gospel and Scripture* at: http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/gospel_scripture.pdf

[16] See Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Fellowship in the First Four Centuries* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 43-62.

[17] See the 1981 report of the CTCR on *The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship* (see esp. "The Principles of Fellowship") at: http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/Nature_Implications1.pdf

Hughes, Richard. T. *Reviving the Ancient Faith.* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996.
Mayer, F. E. *The Religious Bodies of America.* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956 (371-87).
North, J. B. "Restoration Movement," in *Dictionary of Christianity in America.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990 (1005-1008).

Links and Websites

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restoration_Movement
www.thecra.org/restmovement.html
http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/
http://www.bible.acu.edu/stone-campbell/
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