

the
**Restoration
Movement**

fulfilled in

**JESUS
CHRIST**

by
EDWARD FUDGE

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1 / How It Started

Go with me to the early 19th century, to a devout Presbyterian minister and his godly, scholarly son, lately come separately to America. Disenchanted with the sectarianism which choked their church, they determined by God's grace to do better.

This country became their Promised Land - a territory ruled by sectarian giants who lived in churches with great walls, but ripe nonetheless for the vengeance of the Lord, and ready to yield their spoils to the simple People of God.

Soon the trumpets sounded, the foes were thrown into confusion and turmoil, and the breezes hummed with the arrows of the invaders. Any adversary who waved his ordination papers or theological diplomas soon found that Alexander Campbell favored them as targets for his sharpest darts.

The Virginia (now West Virginia) planter-scholar was sufficiently endowed financially to spend much time doing the things he enjoyed most. From his analytical mind and immense vocabulary flowed an impressive volume of teaching. Campbell published two papers, *The Christian Baptist* and *The Millennial Harbinger*. His public debates were impressive and always well-attended. He was in constant demand as a speaker throughout the bustling and ever-expanding land.

The Campbells and their comrades-in-arms made their own contribution to American Christianity (and to posterity worldwide). But they were by no means alone. More than a dozen such "restoration movements" began during these same years in America. Churches springing from this native stock dot the land today. And although each considers itself unique, if the worshippers ever bother to investigate one another they usually discover a number of their "distinctive" beliefs and practices to be held in common.

God had indeed prepared the soil for the movement these men led, just as he prepares hearts and times throughout history. A spirit of expectancy prevailed throughout the land. Health-movements sprang up, back-to-nature advocates flourished. There were social utopian dreamers and planners of communes. Campbell named his major journal *The Millennial Harbinger*, and he published it for nearly 40 years. The same expectant atmosphere breathed life into America's own "prophetic" movements, three of which grew up to become the Seventh-day Adventists, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons).

Spiritual revival swept the land, wielding an influence so great it is remembered as the Second Great Awakening. When historians write of that revival, they nearly always speak of Cane Ridge, Kentucky. There the magnetism of fervent preaching drew people from many walks of life. With conviction of sin came strange physical demonstrations. Men and women jumped and jerked, "barked," shouted, and fell to the ground.

The primary preacher at Cane Ridge was a young Presbyterian minister named Barton Warren Stone. Charged with evangelistic fervor, Stone denounced denominational divisions and called for a return to primitive Christianity. He taught his converts to call themselves simply "Christians." Armed with an outstanding intellect, Alexander Campbell was pursuing similar goals, identifying his people as "disciples of Christ." Later the two groups joined forces, fusing Stone's passion for religious revival with Campbell's for rational reform.

Today three groups of churches stand as descendants of the work of these men. One of these, the Disciples of Christ, is a fully-organized denomination. Two others, the independent Christian Churches and the Churches of Christ, have no formal denominational organization and are fundamentally alike except for the use of instrumental music in worship.

2 / An Idealized Story

We humans seem to have a natural tendency to glamorize our past, reinterpret our miscalculations, rationalize our mistakes and develop an idealistic "history" in retrospect. The official chronicles of nearly every king of antiquity provide sufficient evidence for such a judgment. Religious movements generally do the same.

There is reason to think the popular account of the Restoration Movement of Campbell and Stone has also enjoyed cosmetic touches here and there. Literature and filmstrips used in outreach efforts often include an integral section on the movement's history. It tells a fascinating story of the one, true church - its glorious beginning, its early defection, and its marvelous restoration. The high points of the story are usually something as follows.

There originally was but one, true church. It was established by Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, on the Day of Pentecost about A.D. 33. At the first, the church enjoyed universal harmony and unity, teaching everywhere the same doctrine and maintaining identical practices. Pristine purity prevailed, and the gospel spread worldwide. Before the New Testament Scriptures were completed, however, another trend set in. Over the years the original church changed into something Jesus never envisioned and did not approve.

This corruption touched almost every aspect of church life and work, the story says, but especially its name, form of worship, organization, government, and terms of admission or "plan of salvation." The Roman Catholic Church was the formal result of apostasy, in this account. Although there might have been some true Christians from the second or third centuries until the nineteenth in this view, their identity is practically unknown today.

The Protestant Reformation made an effort to turn things around, the story goes, but since it only sought to "reform" rather than to "restore," it did not go nearly far enough. It was therefore by and large a failure, its primary result being a multiplicity of denominations, each with its own peculiar set of errors.

In the nineteenth century, however, God was ready to restore his true church. Men such as Thomas and Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, Elias Smith and Abner Jones were used by him in the effort. And their work, combined with that of others, "restored" the desired product - the

New Testament Church, as pure and sweet as the day it was born!

The listening prospect is awed by the grandeur of this tale - as are those to whom Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and others go with the identical outline but different details. But such a presentation raises several important if troublesome questions.

How, in light of Jesus' promise in Matthew 16:18-19, could his church have vanished from the face of the earth for most of the Christian era? Of what does the church's purity and unity consist in the New Testament - in every external form, or in its essential gospel and life? If the first, how does one account for the believers being called different "names" from the very first - "disciples" in Jerusalem, but "Christians" at Antioch?

Did not the Jerusalem church from the first show a willingness to modify externals to meet the needs, first practicing a communal style which was later dropped? Were they not governed by the apostles in the beginning, later adding deacons in fact if not in name when the occasion demanded? Did not Jewish believers (especially in Palestine) continue their Hebrew heritage of Mosaic customs, synagogue worship and structure something never imposed on Gentile churches as such? And does not the New Testament show a diversity among Gentile churches, some functioning along a charismatic model (Corinth) while others had more formal structure (Ephesus, see I Timothy).

How does one account for the numerous divisions within the Restoration Movement, divisions which can in nearly every case be traced to disagreements over which external "marks" must be "restored"? In a larger context, why have the different "restoration" groups come up with different sets of New Testament distinctives, along with other areas in which they overlap? And how is it that these differences generally reflect either firm similarity to their respective backgrounds, or else reactions against them?

Why, regardless of background, do such groups almost always concern themselves with external, visible matters? Does anyone's "pattern," for example, include the "marks" Paul specifically lists in Philippians 3:3, all of which concern the heart? Might this be because visible externals are either to achieve, easier to check, and easier to use for self-justification?

This "history" is questionable also because of the way it underplays every other work of God through the centuries of the Christian church. What of great gospel preachers like Augustine and Chrysostom? What of the great company of martyrs who gave testimony to Christ with their own blood, but who are remembered today only by the Roman, Orthodox or Anglican communions? And the sixteenth century reformers, were they nothing more than amateurs who made a few minor contributions but finally missed the boat?

More fundamental, were none of these people true Christians at all, because they supposedly "missed the boat"? Were Thomas and Alexander Campbell themselves true Christians - *before* they "restored the true church"? If so, when? While they were Presbyterians? After they joined the Baptists? After they left the Baptists? What of others who now occupy the same ground from which they began their quest? Are they God's people, even though they have not yet "arrived"? Has any of us "arrived"? Has God run out of Presbyterians (or Baptists, or Anglicans, or Catholics, or members of Churches of Christ) through whom he can do his work?

Aside from these biblical and theological questions, there is the simple matter of historical accuracy. Does this popularized history reflect what actually happened in those years of the 1800's? Would the restoration pioneers recognize themselves in our story? How would they tell what they were about and what they hoped to accomplish, if they were to tell the story?

3 / Campbell's 4-Point Plan

The Campbells and their associates were not alone in pursuing simple Christianity. Although their restoration movement now seems easy to identify, it sprang from many different currents which sometimes mingled and sometimes crossed. Yet today's Churches of Christ represent the heritage of Alexander Campbell above that of his fellows, and his own early progression of thought is easy to summarize. His plan went something like this.

1. The millennium is surely coming soon.
2. The world must be converted first.
3. Christians must unite if the world is to convert.
4. The way to this unity is restoration of the ancient order.

1. The millennium is surely coming soon. Alexander Campbell was a post-millennialist. He would be almost an oddity today but his view had enjoyed great popularity for 1500 years when he came along. Campbell believed that the millennium was at hand, and that Jesus would return at its conclusion. But this utopia could result only from the success of the gospel, and this meant that

2. The world must be converted first. Such an understanding of God's victory necessarily required that the world be converted. All nations would soon accept Jesus Christ, Campbell believed, and the United States of America would probably lead the way. But division among Christians hindered the world's conversion, Campbell observed. He therefore reasoned that

3. Christians must unite if the world is to believe. Jesus' words rang heavy in Campbell's ears: ". . . that all of them may be *one* . . . so that the *world may believe*" (John 17:21). Neither Campbell nor any of the first generation pioneers seemed to have thought that the true church had vanished from the earth, or that all those rightly related to God would be found in special association with their own preaching or work. God's people were scattered over the mountains, Campbell affirmed, and were divided by many denominational walls. How could the world believe in face of such shameful division? Victory, Campbell said, depended on unity among Christians. And, he concluded,

4. The way to this unity is "restoration." Thomas Campbell's seminal *Declaration and address* set forth the principles, and Alexander Campbell pressed them hard upon a fragmented Christendom. The way to come together, he insisted, is through a restoration of New Testament Christianity, a pristine state he like to refer to as "the ancient order."

Campbell was consumed with passion for what he imagined as the primitive purity of the church. He gazed fondly at a distant past and dreamed of an imminent future. For him, restoration was the path to that future.

These, then, were Campbell's themes: the coming millennium, the world's conversion, the unity of Christians, and the restoration of the ancient order. The first was his starting-point: the rest evolved one by one as means to that end. By such an arrangement the pioneer father wove his threads into a coat of many colors.

4 / Chopping The Roots

Probably no one in the Churches of Christ today (or any other part of our restoration movement) shares Campbell's four basic views. The great disappointments of the nineteenth century burst many an optimistic bubble - particularly the bloody Civil War which divided most denominations as well as the country. Campbell's postmillennial hope was but one form of utopianism that dashed against the rocks of history.

The Restoration Movement has a small *premillennial* segment still, centering in strength around Louisville, Kentucky, but it derives from the later teaching of R. H. Boll, not from the original pioneers (some of whom, unlike Campbell, held pre-millennial expectations of the future). A recent book entitled *Until*, by Churches of Christ author Robert Shank, also argues for Christ's millennial reign on earth, but its author knows he is representing a minority view within this brotherhood. The movement has cut its root of millennialism, which may have been the mainspring of its inception.

The original dream of practical Christian unity also quickly tarnished, as the Restoration Movement itself fragmented in its disagreements over what to restore. Unity is still a key word in public relations and mass media outreach, although it is disassociated entirely today from Campbell's postmillennial hope.

Those attracted by the unity ideal soon find that they must rationalize the iron bars and solid steel walls within the movement itself, which divide it first into three major divisions, then into sub-groups and sub-sub groups.

Where Campbell felt called to "unite the Christians in all the sects," many of his modern successors deny that there are any true Christians in "the sects," which they define as all groups except their own. For these, "unity" means leaving the "sects" to identify with the "true church," once restored but in constant danger of apostasy. There are wonderful exceptions to this, of course, and an increasing number of preachers and other leaders now openly express views to the contrary. Still, "unity" as Campbell envisioned it, has long since been a lost ideal among most of his descendants.

Campbell's *restoration* goal has also encountered hard times. The problem with restoration seems to have come in the way the ideal was implemented. Because the most obvious *differences* among professing Christian bodies are *external* - names, organization, liturgy, ordinances, etc. - these became the primary subjects for *restoration* efforts. The attempt to restore the New Testament church was limited almost entirely to these externals, as the nineteenth and twentieth century restorationists read the Bible and tried to discern the proper "pattern."

When that happened, the "restoration" goal almost inevitably became a source of friction and an occasion for division among those who professed to seek it. Most important of all, without a strong

foundation stone of the Jesus-centered gospel of salvation by grace through faith, many people scattered throughout the movement came to view restoration itself as the means to salvation and the basis for fellowship with each other.

5 / Assessing Our Treasures

Today the Restoration Movement resembles a venerable family that has occupied the same house for many generations. The rooms are comfortable, the furnishings are familiar, and the attic is full of fascinating memorabilia. But now the time has come for a thorough housecleaning.

God has given the men and women of our Restoration Movement certain valid insights, as even those outside our churches are free to say. But it would be foolish and naive indeed for us to suppose that no dust has settled, no broken antiques have been closeted, no trash has been mixed mistakenly with the treasures. In the spirit of preserving what is good, therefore, and in hopes of a cleaner, fresher house, we offer the following modest suggestions.

1. We can use "restoration" as a tool without regarding it as an end. Any individual or group of persons needs some basis for discerning God's will as revealed in Scripture. The ideal of restoration can be a useful tool for such a purpose. All will agree that biblical Christianity was quickly polluted by the influx of many sources: Greek philosophy, Jewish tradition, pagan lifestyles, Roman structures of order and Catholic syncretism. The Protestant Reformation, for all its contributions, led to additional incrustations, as common opinions were codified into orthodoxy, then were transmitted without question to later generations. The Restoration Movement has accumulated its own traditions as well, in both teaching and practice.

The restoration ideal can serve a valuable purpose as a scraper, a handy tool for cleaning layers of dried and encrusted paint from the furniture in an attempt to make it shine as at the first. This can be done without glamorizing the first-century church beyond its true state as revealed in the New Testament. We must also remember that restoration is only a tool that can be helpful in serving God, not an end within itself. It is not the only tool, nor is it indispensable, for others may approach the Scriptures with a humble heart and learn what God ultimately desires, even if they never think in terms of "restoring" anything.

2. We can cherish the ideal of a pure church without making it an idol that competes with Jesus. Surely no one can quarrel with the desire for a pure church, especially if it is accompanied by Christ-honoring humility and a becoming manner. Yet the quest for a pure church has too often become a mere slogan, disconnected entirely from a vital personal knowledge of God in Christ. It is then easy for carnal people to twist this proper ideal into a cover for their own selfish ambition and pride. More than once, the goal of a pure church has been the excuse for mistreating others for whom Christ died, a warped mirror which always flatters the person who uses it.

Even worse, the ideal of a pure church can itself become the basis of one's confidence before God now and in the day of judgment. This finally leads either to deceit and conceit on the one hand, or to discouragement and despair on the other. In either case it serves Satan's ends, not God's. Either way, it comes very near perverting the true gospel, as it corrupts an ideal which could honor God into an idol that blasphemes him instead.

Christ must be our message, not a historical movement or an idealistic church. Paul said: "We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord" (2 Cor. 4:5). There is a great tendency for any restoration movement to do the very thing Paul here renounces. It is very easy to preach the church (ourselves) instead of Jesus Christ. This has often taken at least three forms.

First, one can preach an idealized church of the ancient past, directing men's attention to a hypothetical dream which never existed on earth in the first place. Second, one can preach his own historical movement or fellowship within church history instead of preaching Jesus Christ. God's kingdom is far greater than any religious movement, in any country in any century. Third, one can preach the theory of a pure church rather than preaching Jesus Christ. Given the power of sin, this is an impossible dream, since, as Jesus himself said, there will always be tares among the wheat.

One has only to read the Book of Acts to see the content of the earliest Christian preaching. That message concerned a Savior, not a competitive church system. Regardless of where they began, all roads for the earliest evangelists finally led to Jesus Christ. Today we must also preach the Son of God, not sinful men of the past or the present. Jesus must receive our primary attention, not merely passing reference. We must make Christ our central message if we intend to continue naming him on our signboards. Otherwise we will be guilty of false advertising, and in that we will fool no one but ourselves.

3. We can relate to our historical heritage without losing our perspective. Although we like to say that the New Testament church was established on Pentecost in A.D. 33, and to say that is all we are, we simply cannot erase 1900 years of history as if it never transpired. What is *known* today as the "Churches of Christ," the "Christian Churches" or the "Disciples of Christ" had a historical beginning in nineteenth century America, under circumstances we have outlined above. That is unvarnished, historical fact. One may deny facts, or ignore them, but they will not go away.

We might say that we wish to be nothing more than simple Christians after the New Testament order - with all the risks and ambiguities that aspiration will involve. We might insist that "our" congregations are free under Christ alone - wondering whether the very pronoun "our" contradicts such a claim. We might scrupulously avoid linking local churches by any formal denominational structure - yet honestly acknowledging the informal interlocks, networks and influences that more or less control us all. Whatever we do, however, we must realize that we, like all others around us, are a part of history. Our movement did not fall out of the clear blue sky. It had roots, ancestors, environment, just as all movements among men do.

We can give thanks for every insight our forefathers gained into the Scriptures. But we dare neither stop where they did, nor to assume that they were right in all their own judgments and teaching.

We can recover the sense of being a "movement" in at least two respects. We can remember first that we belong to the church universal, and at best make a contribution within that larger picture. Second, we can remember that one never "restores" unless he keeps "moving." It is unmitigated hypocrisy for anyone to urge all his religious neighbors: "Just go by the Bible, regardless of what your parents, church, or anyone else has ever taught you to be," then respond to his own critics within by intoning "what faithful gospel preachers have always taught." Our children are neither blind nor deaf to such foolishness, and those we have taught to be honest will reject it outright. Still some will shake their heads and ask why so many are "leaving the old paths."

Our "identity" must finally be no more than that of any faithful Christian in any age of the world. Separated from trusting faith in Jesus Christ, "distinctives" are worse than worthless. Then they also instill self-righteousness and compete with the true gospel. In the day of judgment there will be no point in bringing God a package of tracts proving our "soundness," or dragging in a bundle of arguments that state our "identity" and distinguish our "distinctives." Nothing *we* can bring will see us through that Day. We can only point then to the sinless Son of God, slain for our sins and raised for our justification. Better to lighten our baggage now in preparation for what will then be inevitable! We can appreciate our history (everybody has one) while keeping it in perspective.

4. We can remember that managing the church is God's work, not ours. The "glorious church" does not depend on man's efforts, hard work or mental agility. The "restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21) will be the work of God himself, in his own good time, and by his own power and might.

Jesus is building his own true church from living stones, drawn together by the Holy Spirit as the gospel goes out throughout the world. Mere man can never build that church, destroy it, restore it, or preserve it. Anything that we can erect or protect is fleshly in origin and not from God. The only "true tabernacle" is the one the Lord builds, not man (Heb. 8:2). Anyone who is so beguiled by ideals of "restoration" that he forgets this fundamental truth dooms himself to walk a dead-end street and guarantees his final disappointment.

6 / The 'History' That Counts

The theme of the Bible is Jesus Christ. It speaks of his church, but the church never competes with Jesus for attention. The Old Testament anticipates and prefigures the coming of the Son of God (Lk. 24:44-45). Its (moral) laws anticipate his sinless life. Its ceremonies and rituals prefigure his sacrificial death and priesthood (Matt. 5:18; Hebrews). The New Testament describes Christ's saving work as it transpired (the Gospels). It relates his ongoing work by the Spirit as the gospel marched in triumph across the first-century world (Acts). It tells Christians how to live in view of what Jesus has done and will do (the Epistles). It assures them that he rules already and will come again in open victory (Revelation).

The church in the New Testament is simply the people of God. By God's grace, they can only *receive* salvation. They are not its authors, guardians or dispensers (Eph. 5:23).

Like John the Baptist, the church should always point to Jesus, never to itself (John 3:30). As a body, it depends on Christ its head for life and for direction (Col. 2:17-19). As citizenry of the kingdom, it owes allegiance to Jesus Christ (Col. 1:13-14; Phil. 2:10-11). If citizens ever create their own flag and write their own slogans, they become rebels and not loyal subjects (Luke 19:14, 27). The true church must never compete with Jesus Christ. Whenever it does so, it immediately ceases to be "true."

According to Jesus' promise in Matthew 16:18ff, the church will never be destroyed. In that sense, it can never need restoring, for Jesus guarantees its constant and perpetual existence in spite of all the forces of hell.

But that does not protect the church from problems or insulate it from ills. According to the entire New Testament from the Day of Pentecost onward, the first-century churches suffered from practically every problem, error and sin we can imagine today. The Book of Acts opens almost with major corruption and division in the Jerusalem church (Acts 5, 6). The Book of Revelation closes the story with several churches of Asia equally distraught and off the path (Rev. 1-3). The church's only hope is Jesus Christ - not its own "purity" or "knowledge." This was as true in the first century as it is in the twentieth, and it is certainly as true today as it was then.

God calls us to trust Jesus now for right standing with himself, the only way to real peace (Rom. 5:1; 8:1). He calls us to give ourselves to him in a holy life of thankful obedience and zealous service. He calls us to rise again one day - to be found in him, not having any righteousness of our own but that which comes only from God and only through trusting in Jesus (Phil. 3:8-9). Finally he will call us to enter judgment, but without fear - then to be presented forever to Christ the Lord with exceeding joy (I John 4:17-18; Jude 24-25).

This will cost us the pride of all our supposed "distinctives" - but it will enable us to rejoice in Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:3-11). It will mean sacrificing our own "identity" - but Jesus will confess us as belonging to him (Matt. 10:32). We must throw out forever all dependence on the flesh, whether it be intellectual achievement, moral attainment, doctrinal argument, or our successes at "restoration." But Jesus has promised never to leave us or forsake us until the end of the age (Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5-6).

In short, God calls us to forfeit ourselves, to love not our own lives even to death. But he has promised that all who lose their lives for his sake will find life indeed (Matt. 10:39).

History is an ever-moving stream. We were born into it at a particular point; we will leave it when God sees fit. Over it all, however, stands Jesus Christ, and he alone gives any of it meaning. In the entire history of our race, there is only one short period in the life of one man which God can ever accept. Those are the approximately 12,000 days of the bodily experience of Jesus of Nazareth.

There only can one find the perfect "doing" which can pass unsinged through the fires of judgment. There only can one see the perfect "dying" which exhausts all the curses of a broken covenant and drains the divine wrath to its dregs. No other life or death can stand before God's holy scrutiny. This alone is "holy history." This only can enter judgment and receive the acquittal of Almighty God.

The gospel tells us that this is what happened in the person of Jesus our representative. It was *his* obedience, his blood, and *his* now-risen and glorified life which secured our right standing before God. *Jesus obeyed*, and *we* are made righteous (Rom. 5:19). *He* died and *we* are reconciled (Rom. 5:10). *He* arose and *we* shall pass safely through the great judgment day (Rom. 5:10).

The work underlying our salvation is finished: the gospel proclaims that news. All we can do is believe it - trust God who is always faithful and who never lies! "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). Peace can be had in no other way.

When we grasp this, our "history of the true church" begins to sound like a childish tale. All human history becomes a passing smoke, its achievements vanity, its righteousness filthy rags. The everlasting gospel frees us to die to our own history in order to live to Christ's. And that history,

accomplished outside us and for us, has already reached its goal -in glory at God's right hand!

7 / The 'End' of Our Efforts

The Jews of Paul's day were so busy trying to establish their own righteousness that they missed the righteousness God freely provided (Rom. 10:1-3). Their essential mistake was that they sought God's approval as if it were a matter of works. They were *trying* but they were not *trusting*. And they were left out while the Gentiles were entering in (Rom. 9:30-33). Many in the Restoration Movement seem to have made the same mistake today, with equally tragic results.

Paul defended the Law, but he insisted that it had found its fulfillment in Jesus. He urged the Jews to see themselves standing in relation to the Law *fulfilled* (in Jesus), not try to find righteousness through fulfilling it themselves. Everything they tried to attain by keeping the Law, God offered freely through faith in Jesus. In this sense, Christ had become the *end* (*goal - telos*) of the Law, to all who believed in Jesus (Rom. 10:4).

May we close by making the same statement about the work begun by Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone. Their best goals are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. All they ever promised, hoped for or sought after are found only through saving trust in him. As Paul said then to those who pointed with great pleasure to their "identity" as the People of God, so we believe he would say today to Churches of Christ, Christian Churches and the Disciples of Christ:

CHRIST is the end (*goal - telos*)

of the Restoration Movement,

to all who believe

in Jesus.