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Ira J. Jolivet Jr.
Ira.Jolivet@pepperdine.edu

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The Restoration Movement Hermeneutic in Light of God's Transcendent Freedom

IRA J. JOLIVET, JR.

Theologians use the term *transcendence* to signify a distancing of God the Creator from his creation and from his creatures, including human beings. These scholars deduce from explicit and implicit scriptural sources at least three major attributes of God that contribute to this perceived distancing: his holiness, his otherness and his freedom. As people who have traditionally sought to adhere strictly to the principle "Speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent," we in Restoration movement churches have little if any problem with discussing God's holiness. It is not likely, however, that many of us are comfortable with technical theological language such as transcendence or otherness. Nor are we likely to consider or discuss God's freedom to any degree. Were we to do so, we might recognize that our hermeneutic of interpreting the New Testament according to the letter of the law, inherited primarily from Thomas Campbell (one of the primary shapers of Restoration thought), has essentially become an unconscious, unintentional and futile attempt to restrict the transcendent nature of God's freedom. As a consequence of this attempt, many of our congregations have undergone splits over doctrinal issues, while others have just slowly withered away and died.

To see how we have arrived at this predicament we must first understand the transcendent nature of God's freedom. We begin with Ezek 20.21b-26, which reads:

Then I thought I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the wilderness. But I withheld my hand, and acted for the sake of my name, so that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out. Moreover I swore to them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them through the countries, because they had not executed my ordinances, but had rejected my statutes and profaned my sabbaths, and their eyes were set on their ancestors' idols. Moreover I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live. I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up of their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the Lord.

In v. 25 we see that, amazingly, God punished his people Israel in the wilderness for their idolatry by giving them "statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live." Furthermore, in v. 26 we see that as a result of observing these divinely ordained laws, the people of Israel offered their own children as sacrifices to God. While God's act of judgment here might well engender questions in our minds about the nature of his justice, it leaves little doubt that he is absolutely free to deal with humans as he sees fit.

To the extent of our knowledge, those of us who have sought to restore New Testament Christianity throughout the last two centuries have not been judged collectively by God and found guilty of idolatry as were the people of Israel during the Babylonian Exile. We do, however, share something in common. This

begins to come to light when we consider that biblical commentators as ancient as Origin¹ and as modern as Walther Zimmerli² have observed that the divinely given statutes which led to human sacrifice were the result of Israel's attempts to interpret some of the sacrificial laws in the Torah *literally*. One of those laws would most likely have been Exod 22.29b-30, which states: "The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me." A similar law is found in Exod 34.19-20, which reads: "All that first opens the womb is mine, all your male livestock, the firstborn of cow and sheep. The firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem."

It is not difficult to see that these laws are sufficiently ambiguous to allow for literal interpretations. And it is also not difficult to see how these interpretations could lead Israel to the erroneous conclusion that God intended them to offer their own firstborn male children as sacrifices to him. We may conclude, then, that the literal interpretation of these sacrificial laws was not good, and that adherence to the strict letter of these laws lead to death rather than to life. Conversely, we may also conclude that the interpretation of the laws, interpretation which conformed to God's true intent of behind the letter, would be the good statutes and ordinances that lead to life.

We in Restoration movement churches, like the people of God in Ezekiel chapter 20, have generally interpreted the scriptures literally and have sought to adhere to the letter rather than the intent of the law. We have been guided by hermeneutical principles which Thomas Campbell articulated in one of the foundational documents of the Restoration movement, the *Declaration and Address*. The first of these principles is found in the following excerpt:

Thus have we briefly endeavored to shew our brethren, what evidently appears to us to be the heinous nature and dreadful consequences of the truly latitudinarian principle and practice, which is the bitter root of almost all our divisions; namely, the imposing of our private opinions upon each other, as articles of faith or duty; introducing them into the public profession and practice of the church, and acting upon them, as if they were the express law of Christ, by judging and rejecting our brethren that differ with us in those things; or, at least, by *so* retaining them in our public profession and practice, that our brethren cannot join with us, or we with them, without becoming actually partakers in those things, which they, or we, cannot, in conscience approve; and which the word of God no where expressly enjoins us. To cease from all such things, by simply returning to the original standard of Christianity—the profession and practice of the primitive church, as expressly exhibited upon the sacred page of New Testament scripture, is the only possible way, that we can perceive, to get rid of those evils. And we humbly think that a uniform agreement in *that* for the preservation of charity would be infinitely preferable to our contentions and divisions: nay, that such a uniformity is the very thing that the Lord requires, if the New Testament be a perfect model—a sufficient formula for the worship, discipline and government of the Christian church. Let *us* do, as we are there expressly told *they* did, say as *they* said: that is, profess and practice as therein expressly enjoined by precept and precedent, in every possible instance, after *their* approved example; and in so doing we shall realize, and exhibit, all that unity and uniformity, that the primitive church possessed, or that the law of Christ requires.³

1. *Contra Celsum* 7.18. Quoted and discussed in Boaz Cohen, *Jewish and Roman Law: A Contemporary Study*, Vol.1 (New York: Shulsinger Bros., 1966), 58-59.

2. *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Vol.1*, eds. Frank Moore Cross and Klaus Baltzer, trans. Ronald E. Clemens (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 411-12.

3. Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, Centennial Edition (Pennsylvania: Record Publishing Company, 1909), 35, <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/tcampbell/da/DA-CE.HTM#35>.

Here we see that Campbell attributed divisions in Christianity to the imposition by some church leaders of private opinions (interpretations) as matters of faith and duty upon other Christians. Here we also see that Campbell himself sought to bring about unity through adherence to the law of Christ, expressly joined by precept and precedent, and by approved example in the New Testament, which he views as a perfect model for the worship, discipline, and government of the church.

The key term *expressly* may be understood in light of the following excerpt, in which Campbell elaborates further on the causes of divisions within Christianity.

We say, let them profess what they will, their difference in religious profession and practice originates in their departure from what is expressly revealed and enjoined; and not in their strict and faithful conformity to it—which is the thing we humbly advise for putting an end to those differences. But you may say, do they not already all agree in the letter, though differing so far in the sentiment? However this may be, have they all agreed to make the letter their rule; or rather to make it the subject matter of their profession and practice? Surely no; or else they would all profess and practice the same thing. Is it not as evident as the shining light, that the scriptures exhibit but one and the self same subject matter of profession and practice; at all times, and in all places;—and, that therefore, to say as it declares, and do as it prescribes, in all its holy precepts, its approved and imitable examples, would unite the Christian church in a holy sameness of profession and practice, throughout the whole world?⁴

For Campbell, speaking as the New Testament declares and doing as it prescribes in precepts and by example, is equal to adhering to the letter of the law. In his view, the way to achieve Christian unity is to adhere strictly to this letter of the law.

As Campbell's spiritual descendants, the Restoration churches have inherited his well-intentioned goal of achieving Christian unity. Unfortunately, we have also inherited his likewise well-intentioned but highly problematic view of the New Testament as a legal document that must be followed to the precise letter. This view is problematic because it is the exact opposite of the way the New Testament figures and writers, including the apostle Paul and Jesus himself, interpreted their authoritative scriptures. In Rom 2.28-29, for example, Paul writes: "For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God." And in Rom 7.6 he goes on to write: "But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit."

In both of these passages, Paul was sending loud and clear signals to his audience in Rome—an audience certainly more rhetorically sensitive than modern readers that he was arguing for following the spirit of the law rather than the letter. In fact, Paul's purpose in writing to the church in Rome was to heal the divisions that had arisen because the Jewish converts who continued to follow the letter of the Torah's dietary and sacred calendar laws were judging and boasting over the Gentile members who did not. Paul sums up his argument succinctly in Rom 14.17-18 when he writes: "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval." The conclusion would have been obvious to Paul's audience: those in the kingdom of God follow the intent or spirit of the law rather than its letter.

Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount lead to the same conclusion. For in Matt 5.31-32 he states: "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and who-

4. *Ibid.*, 36, <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/tcampbell/da/DA-CE.HTM#36>.

ever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” Those to whom Jesus spoke knew that he was interpreting Deut 24.1-4, which reads:

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession.

In this letter of the law on divorce and remarriage, we see that the woman had no rights whatsoever. She was completely vulnerable. Furthermore, the man bore no responsibility for guilt. Jesus’ interpretation rectifies this situation. The woman cannot be divorced for any frivolous reason and the man bears responsibility for causing her to sin. By interpreting Deut 24.1-4 in this way, Jesus articulates the true intent of God behind the letter of the law on divorce and remarriage.

We in the Restoration churches should emulate Jesus and Paul by practicing a hermeneutic which seeks to find the true intent of God rather than the letter of the law in scripture. More specifically, we must refrain from isolating individual verses and passages from the larger context in which they appear and using them as proof-texts primarily for the plan of salvation and for the worship, discipline and governance of the church. Rather, we should read scripture within context and let the texts speak for themselves.

We must humbly realize that we stand in need of divine assistance in order to hear what the texts are saying about God’s true intent. This is the same divine assistance that Paul assumed was available to the members of the church in Ephesus when he exhorted them to “try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord” (Eph 5.10) and not to be foolish, “but understand what the will of the Lord is” (5.17). Paul implies that the Ephesians were able to find out what was pleasing to the Lord and to understand his will even before the letter of the law of the New Testament had been completely written, compiled and distributed. Paul’s audience would have understood how they were able to do this because of his prayer on their behalf in Eph 3.16-19, in which he had stated: “I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” Ultimately, then, it was the power of God’s Spirit that enabled all the members of the church at Ephesus to comprehend at least some aspects of his intent and his will apart from the letter of the law.

God imparted knowledge of even further aspects of his intent and will through yet another major source, identified by Paul in Ephesians 5.1-2, in which he exhorts the Ephesians to “be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Paul’s exhortation here strongly implies that one imitates God by following the example of Christ’s self-sacrificial love. Stated another way, Christ is the embodiment of God’s intent and will, apart from the letter of the law. Knowledge of Christ’s life, his teachings, his death, burial, resurrection and exaltation, then, are all expressions of God’s true intent. Paul describes how God facilitates acquisition of this knowledge about Christ in Eph 4.11-13: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” Here Paul tells the Ephesians that God’s ultimate goal is that they be conformed to knowledge of his will as embodied in Christ. He also implicitly tells them that

this knowledge is conveyed by gifted servants who interpret Christ as the true intent behind the letter of the law.

The Restoration churches have obeyed the same gospel as the Christians in Ephesus did almost two thousand years ago, and we are no less God's people. We confidently believe that he has given us the same resources that he gave them for the discernment of his will, namely; his Holy Spirit through which we have acquired "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2.16), the example of Christ who is the very embodiment of God's will, and, finally, ministers and teachers to help all of us to comprehend God's true intent in his Holy Scriptures. We must not attempt to restrict God's transcendent freedom by interpreting the New Testament as the new letter of the law. For, as Paul warns the church at Corinth, as well as those of us who make up the churches of the Restoration Movement today, "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (1 Cor 3.6).

IRA J. JOLIVET, JR. teaches New Testament at Pepperdine University in Malibu and preaches for the Woodland Hills Church of Christ, Woodland Hills, California.

