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The Future of the Restoration Movement

LEONARD ALLEN

These days I live in Wal-Mart country; in significant ways, come to think of it, we probably all do. Living only twenty miles from the world headquarters of the world's largest retailer, I meet people who knew Sam Walton and who tell me first-hand stories about him. Their voices are usually tinged with awe. Our neighbor's son, a University of Arkansas student, told me in our get-acquainted talk last fall that he hopes to become CEO of Wal-Mart some day. The university where I teach is thriving off Wal-Mart money. So is the whole economy of Benton County, Arkansas. Wal-Mart has almost single-handedly reshaped the way things are bought and sold in the West. And that revolution cascades upon others, extending to the upheavals and realignments facing Christians in America.

Let me begin by telling you some of the key experiences that shaped me on my way to Wal-Mart country. For over twenty-five years I was immersed in the task of understanding the theological heritage of the Stone-Campbell Movement, and particularly the Churches of Christ in which I was reared. I got into this early on because of my own nagging curiosities and troubling doubts about my early indoctrination. Church history and historical theology functioned for me as a kind of therapy. Then in the years that followed I sought through writing and teaching to help insiders come to terms with the Church of Christ tradition, and outsiders to better understand it. It has been a preoccupation and perhaps at times an obsession. Often I thrilled at the challenges; often I was wrenched by the difficulties. For the discoveries I made not only brought me a new freedom and wideness of vision, but also disorientation and sometimes sharp personal struggle. I worked with hundreds of Church of Christ seminary students, sometimes easing them, sometimes jolting them, into thinking critically about their modern heritage.

Midway through those years I focused a period of extensive research on the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), rethinking its historical relation to the Churches of Christ. I spent several summers holed up in the Disciples of Christ Historical Society. I dialogued (and became friends) with Tony Dunnivant and several other Disciples historians. It became clear to me that both traditions—long utterly estranged and populating different worlds—could properly lay claim to major features of the Campbellite vision, and yet each had rewritten the story in its own favor. The story was more complex than everyone had told me.

In the late 1990s, when I moved to Southern California to support my wife's doctoral work, we became members of a congregation formed by the merger of a Church of Christ and an Independent Christian Church. It was a healthy, dynamic congregation with a blended eldership and ministerial staff. The two traditions that had wedded were still in the later honeymoon phase when we arrived and during our four years there, which were wonderful years, I had an unusual opportunity to see both the larger and subtler differences between the two traditions.

During those California years my wife and I both taught at Biola University, one of the flagship evangelical universities. It was a rich and stimulating experience, but we both came away with the strong sense that Churches of Christ, Christian Churches, and Disciples of Christ, whatever they are, are not evangelicals—or at least not like the ones we knew there. The gulf was wider than we had thought. The most sig-

nificant differences were ecclesiology, the ordinances, non-Calvinism, and eschatology. Those who knew Churches of Christ or Christian Churches at all viewed them as suspect, even heretical. My impression, however, is that today some in Independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ are fairly rushing to become card-carrying evangelicals, either unaware of or unconcerned by what they are leaving behind.

We are newcomers to Wal-Mart country. My wife and I now teach at John Brown University, an evangelical liberal arts school that, like Biola, has never had any denominational affiliation. It welcomes both Episcopalians and premillennialists, both Churches of Christ and charismatics, and, unlike Biola, both Arminians and Calvinists. And the church that a good many university people attend is a growing Independent Christian Church that is downplaying its roots and attracting a broad range of believers, from Roman Catholics to Charismatics. The large majority of its members—and perhaps even the majority of its twelve elders—have scarcely even heard of the Restoration Movement.

Perhaps that is the future of the Restoration Movement. Or at least one future.

There are others, of course. For this nineteenth-century unity Movement has brought us to a place where its three major heirs now have close to a century or more of such separate histories that it's difficult to generalize about the "future of the Restoration Movement." Different futures result from separate histories. Churches of Christ and Independent Christian Churches find it considerably easier to talk together and prognosticate about their futures than both do with the Disciples. But that may be changing. As we move further past the sidelining of the Protestant mainline in America, which the Disciples chose to join in the early twentieth century, and as Churches of Christ and Christian Churches continue to move out of their sectarianism, perhaps that distance will lessen somewhat. The ground may be shifting enough for everyone so that the old walls or trenches will get oddly displaced.

Let me talk further about this shifting ground. One of the central themes of my work over many years has been that the theology of the early Restoration Movement—the way of reading the Bible, the philosophical assumptions, indeed the basic worldview—was formed in the context of the moderate Enlightenment in eighteenth-century England and early nineteenth-century America. This meant not only embracing Baconian natural science as a grid for reading the Bible, but also accommodating the new individualism and populism of American democratic culture. Alexander Campbell did both of these things brilliantly.

The vigorous embrace of these powerful cultural forces was essentially hidden by the illusion that they had escaped tradition. A fundamental premise underlying the Movement was the bold claim that, as Campbell said, "We brought no [traditional] doctrines with us at all into the . . . proposed Reformation."¹ They had become first-century Christians, nothing more or less. No creed but the Bible. No timeworn, human ideologies to pervert their vision. No faded or contrived imitations. Just Bible facts. Just the thing itself.²

For good or for ill—probably for both—the world that upheld such assumptions is collapsing, and a new era is emerging. We are now in a time of worldview change. The modern worldview, with its built-in secular biases and boundless confidence that humans could manage, unite, and control the world, is being dislodged. Some would say it is crumbling. The "technological bluff"—the long-unquestioned conviction that technology will one day solve our problems—has been called. As Thomas Oden recently put it, the "leaky condom" provides an apt symbol of the failure of modernity. The prestige of scientific definitions of reality is diminishing; the invisible spiritual realm is now becoming more real and palpable to Western people.

Most scholars and cultural analysts agree that the long-dominant, modern worldview is receding, if not collapsing, but it is difficult to say what is emerging. Many are calling it "postmodern," a term that has

1. Thomas Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger* 4 (August 1833): 421.

2. Examples of this language are not hard to find: "The church of Christ is not a denomination in the current sense of that word; it is the thing itself. . . . The church of Christ has no part or lot in denominationalism. . . ." John T. Hinds, "Is the Church Denominational?" *Gospel Advocate* 73 (August 6, 1931): 972. See also Wayne Jackson, "Denominationalism," *Gospel Advocate* 145 (November 2003): 22-4.

somewhat different meanings across different disciplines. According to one influential theorist, “the word postmodern. . . designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts.” In its simplest form, he says, it means rejection of meta-narratives. A meta-narrative is simply an overarching, controlling story. In the modern West the controlling story was the Enlightenment story of scientific and cultural progress that became dominant over the last three centuries.³ The early Restoration Movement was significantly rooted in that story.

But in the postmodern period this grand narrative has been overturned, indeed the very possibility of such narratives is rejected. Instead there is only a proliferation of “belief systems,” all of them local and personal.

I don’t particularly like the word postmodern. In fact I use it reluctantly, and then only to mean that modernity has been, for some time, receding and being replaced by something else; that something else is whatever comes after the modern. And what comes after modernity is not one thing but many things. Some of its features include: a sharp increase in the rate of cultural change, a growing uneasiness about science, loss of universals and common goods, a new sense of the ironic, a new place for tradition and community, a new openness to the spiritual.

Let me touch briefly on three of the challenges of this new era that will shape our future.

First, the new spiritual openness. This is one of the most visible and surprising features of the present time. Our culture is marked by a huge spiritual hunger. Not so much a “culture of disbelief” (as Stephen Carter’s book title put it) as a culture of intense, eclectic, and confused spiritual seeking. Postmoderns are trying, in almost every conceivable way, to restore their shriveled souls. At the same time this search for the soul is joined with a widespread disinterest in traditional, institutional Christianity.

How effectively can the modernist heirs of Alexander Campbell respond to this spiritual hunger? With our Campbellite reflexes we will, no doubt, continue to react against the trendy, fashionable—and often heretical—spiritualities of the time, the running after spiritual experiences, the charismatic hype and excesses portrayed in the media. And there will be considerable substance to the critique of these trends. Our heritage, after all, was deeply stamped by sharp reaction against the experiential free-for-all of the Second Great Awakening. But our own theological traditions, which have tended to be reactionary rather than constructive, ill-equip us for the recovery of a robust and balanced spirituality. After all, it took many of us the better part of the twentieth century to get over Z. T. Sweeney’s shocking declaration that “God does no unnecessary work, and the work of the Paraclete is not necessary now.”⁴ I recognize that all three of our sub-traditions have strands of spiritual teaching that countered this heresy to varying degrees; but the shadow of rationalism has lingered long—and lingers still.

Second, the failure of the original unity vision challenges our future. Nicholas Wolterstorff, a noted philosopher and deeply committed Christian, recently observed: “The thinkers of the Enlightenment hoped to bring about a rational consensus in place of fractured tradition. That hope has failed. In my judgment it was bound to fail. It could not succeed.”⁵ This judgment about the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement can also be applied to Christian movements like Alexander Campbell’s that partook of the same spirit and envisioned a similar goal. Campbell and other early nineteenth-century restorationists hoped to bring about a rational consensus in place of a badly fractured Christian tradition. But that hope has failed. Indeed, its failure has been apparent for several generations. Campbell’s Movement itself, after all, spawned several new traditions, themselves reflecting the steadily growing pluralism and fragmentation of democratized

3. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii, xxiv.

4. Z.T. Sweeney, *The Spirit and the Word: A Treatise on the Holy Spirit in Light of a Rational Interpretation of the Word of Truth* (1919; reprint ed., Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate, 1950), 67-79, 95-97, 99.

5. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), 246.

Christianity; and these traditions themselves have evolved into numerous subdivisions, some of them deeply estranged from one another.

The failure has long been apparent, but it was hard to acknowledge. For the theological tradition that shaped us required a rational consensus; and it carried the deep assumption that every honest, rational individual could—and would—read the Bible alike. That after all was a basic assumption of Baconian science and theology as Campbell had articulated it; and that assumption quickly became a hidden, ideological fixture in the Movement. That assumption was questioned long ago by the Disciples of Christ, more recently by Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. For the most part Churches of Christ, and to some extent Christian Churches, have continued to expect (and demand) a rational doctrinal consensus—if not a consensus that triumphantly sweeps the Christian world in a dawning millennium as Campbell envisioned, at least one achieved in a small but faithful enclave of truth and rationality.

Not only has the Enlightenment hope for rational doctrinal consensus failed, but as Wolterstorff noted, it was bound to fail. It could not succeed. For the Enlightenment epistemology was based on the erroneous assumptions that context and community do not matter, that one can stand free of tradition, and that the only path to truth is the unencumbered individual weighing the factual evidence and exercising his or her rational powers. These assumptions were enormously powerful and attractive—and remain so for many people in the Stone-Campbell Movement—but they no longer stand. If nothing else, the sheer force of pluralism and fragmentation has overturned them. We are being forced to recognize the boundedness and embeddedness that marks human life and human knowing. Such recognition tempers the presumption (and indeed the arrogance) that has marked the modern spirit, and allows us to face more fully the way we actually come to our deepest convictions.

Facing up to the failure of the Baconian hope for Christian unity based on doctrinal consensus presents an enormous challenge for many in Churches of Christ and in Christian Churches. Put most simply, this failure strikes near the heart of their tradition; to face up to it will require a fundamental reorientation. There are resources for such reorientation within the tradition itself.⁶ The Disciples of Christ have tapped into some of those resources and used them on their fitful and ill-timed twentieth-century journey toward main-line Protestantism. But their own brand of formal ecumenism has fallen on hard times, and is surely pushing them, as well, into some unexpected reorientation of their unity vision.

Third, the new awareness of tradition and the role of creeds challenges our future. To work at theological reorientation within a tradition, it seems fair to say, one must first be conscious of having or being a tradition. But in my experience of teaching in a seminary and in scores of congregations over many years, it has required a momentous and difficult step for people in Churches of Christ—and many in Christian Churches—to acknowledge that they are deeply part of a human tradition. This is because that very powerful and ever-present tradition had taught them that they were just New Testament Christians, not part of any human, and hence “denominational,” tradition.⁷ Thus the very step of entering into historical consciousness and attempting to own up to the tradition was itself a kind of departure from the tradition. Most of those who have made this journey, I have observed, have found the new vista wonderfully freeing and spiritually uplifting, but at the same time it has left them with the dilemma of what to do with their anti-tradition tradition.

After modernity we are learning that tradition is neither good nor bad. It simply is. We cannot escape it. Indeed, it shapes the very way we construe the “facts.” Our task is not a vain avoidance of tradition but

6. C. Leonard Allen, *Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church* (Abilene, TX: ACU, 1993).

7. F. D. Kershner, a conservative Disciple writing in the early twentieth century, noted this perpetual dilemma. The movement found itself in the strange position, he observed, of being “a party whose basis consisted in opposition to the whole party idea—an unsectarian sect, a non-denominational denomination—a very particular and distinct people, pleading for an idea in its essence catholic and universal. This anomalous position has always embarrassed our work.” “Progress of Restoration Principles,” *Christian Standard* 53 (August 17, 1918): 1403.

rather to identify ourselves with healthy and vibrant traditions. And more than that, to identify ourselves with what is called the Great Tradition—historic orthodoxy marked out by the ecumenical creeds of the early church and the Reformation era.

To speak of the embrace of tradition and creeds still jolts most of us. Though vociferously claiming to be non-creedal and to have the Bible as our only doctrinal standard, churches of the Stone-Campbell Movement, of course, have long possessed a creed. Traditions cannot cohere and continue without them. Functional creeds or statements of faith are the product of theological reflection in the face of pressing needs and challenges facing a tradition. But our creeds have been informal and mostly unacknowledged, a fact which makes critiquing them both hazardous and haphazard. Open and orderly theological reflection is difficult, especially when many of the participants do not think they are doing theological reflection. Modernity could sustain the claim to “pure” objectivity and creedlessness, but in a (post)modern age when we are increasingly recognizing the tradition-determined nature of our convictions and communities, and when the Enlightenment claim to “pure” objectivity has been exposed as illusory, the claim to creedlessness will be increasingly untenable and unworkable.

Some cultural observers have claimed that we are entering a post-denominational age. Certainly denominational loyalties are markedly receding and the old denominational map is becoming less useful to navigate the American Christian terrain.⁸ As George Marsden put it, when people have discovered that all brands of gasoline are basically the same, what they look for is octane. So with denominationalism. For more and more people, spiritual power and vitality is what they seek, not so much a particular brand of church. Further, new, “back-to-the-Bible” churches claiming to be non-denominational are springing up like mushrooms, making claims that sound a lot like the early Stone-Campbell Movement.

God appears to be working in powerful and fresh ways at this juncture in history. Some of the old polarizations are breaking up and old alienating labels are becoming less functional. There is an opening, a ripeness that seems to arise in the shake-up and disorientation that comes with the passing of one era and the emergence of another.

The face of the church in America will continue to change, perhaps dramatically, in the next generation. For Christians of all stripes are now being forced to disengage from the old (neo-)constantinian habits that have enabled them to feel so comfortable and at home in American culture. And as these old habits are being broken, Christians’ true identity as strangers and pilgrims is being renewed, and ways of being the church more suited to the pilgrim life are fitfully emerging.

Today’s heirs of the Restoration Movement will be forced more and more to face up to the realities of becoming missionaries in their own culture and of forming missionary congregations. And missionary congregations in our chaotic (post)modern culture will look and function differently from the churches of “Christian America” that we have grown accustomed to. Indeed, the new status of Christians as cultural outsiders calls for “a new, post-Christendom definition of the church.”⁹

A prominent example of the new missional thrust toward (post)modern culture is the “Emergent Church” movement—a loose, relational network of church leaders who have entered into conversation about the nature of the emerging culture and how to become missionaries to/in it. The point, says one of

8. See Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1988), 71-99, and Wade Clark Roof, “The Church in the Centrifuge,” *Christian Century* (November 8, 1989): 1012-14.

9. Craig Van Gelder, “A Great New Fact of Our Day: America as Mission Field,” in *Between Gospel and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 57-68. Regarding this challenge, Lesslie Newbigin wrote: “We have lived for so many centuries in the ‘Christendom’ situation that ministerial training is almost entirely conceived in terms of the pastoral care of existing congregations. In a situation of declining numbers, the policy has been to abandon areas (such as inner cities) where active Christians are few and to concentrate ministerial resources by merging congregations and deploying ministers in the places where there are enough Christians to support them. Needless to say, this simply accelerates the decline. It is the opposite of a missionary strategy, which would proceed in the opposite direction—deploying ministers in the areas where the Christian presence is weakest.” *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 235-36.

its leading spokesmen, “is not having a gospel that postmodern people like, nor is it starting postmodern churches. . . . Rather, the point is having churches that bring the gospel of the kingdom of God to postmodern people with a style of incarnation that resonates with (and in fact continues) the original Incarnation.”¹⁰

Independent Christian Churches are taking the lead right now in this missional thrust among the Stone-Campbell churches. They have launched a bold new church planting strategy for the twenty-first century, and a growing number of Church of Christ leaders are either partnering with them or seeking to emulate their vision. Christian Church leaders, I think, would explain this in part by the claim that they occupy a moderate or centrist position among the three Stone-Campbell traditions, having pushed through some of the sectarianism on the right and refused an enervating liberalism on the left. They have a growing corps of younger church leaders who have readily embraced the late twentieth-century mega-church model, Willow Creek strategies, and other more recent missional models of church planting. And they are now able to pride themselves on being among the fastest growing Christian groups in America. What remains unclear is the role of serious theological reflection in this bold mission—and the extent to which Christian Churches will lose themselves in the large pool of generic Evangelicalism. Will they join modern Evangelicals in downplaying the ordinances, disconnecting baptism from any sacramental function, embracing Calvinism, and teaching the revivalists’ “plan of salvation”?

From its beginning the Restoration Movement embraced a high view of baptism, insisting that baptism does not just *stand* for something but that it *does* something. In this it stood with the Great Tradition of the faith. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are channels of divine life and grace. They are empowering. They are dynamic and life-giving. They shape and train Christians to be disciples. When one neglects them one is deprived of measures of divine life. As James McClendon puts it, they are performative signs that bring believers more and more into the divine life and draw them more and more into the way of Jesus.¹¹

Such a high view of the ordinances or sacraments, however, requires a firm rootage in a proper trinitarian theology, that is, in a proper understanding of God’s relational nature. Otherwise one too easily makes them magical or mechanical. Or one pronounces that the divine life can flow only in this way and in no other way. Certainly baptism is the normal sign of Christian conversion and initiation. But as Campbell put it, he that “infers that none are Christians but the immersed, as greatly errs as he that affirms that none are alive but those of clear and full vision.”

The revivalistic milieu of early America, which focused so heavily on the private conversion experience, decimated the role of the ordinances or sacraments in what became American Evangelicalism. This was a departure from the Great Tradition of the faith. But today some American Evangelicals are beginning to rediscover believers’ baptism and some are calling for weekly communion. It is not surprising or accidental that this renewed emphasis and recovery comes at the same time that churches in America have been culturally disestablished and forced to function more and more as outsiders. Methodist theologian Stanley Hauerwas says (with tongue only partially in cheek) that one of the goals in his ethics class at Duke Divinity School is to make Methodist ministers feel guilty for not celebrating the Eucharist every week in their churches.¹² This is not a time for preachers, pastors, and church planters in the Stone-Campbell Movement to be surrendering or downplaying a high view of baptism and weekly communion. Indeed, their challenge is to deepen and enrich the meaning of these practices by centering them more deeply and explicitly in the triune life of God.

10. Brian McLaren, “A Letter to Friends of Emergent,” www.anewkindofchristian.com. See also McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (Jossey-Bass, 2003); Dan Kimball and others, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); and Chuck Smith, Jr., *The End of the World...As We Know It: Clear Direction for Bold and Innovative Ministry in a Postmodern World* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2001).

11. James Wm. McClendon, “Baptism as a Performative Sign,” *Theology Today* 23 (October 1966): 403-16, and his *Systematic Theology: Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 386-96.

12. Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1995), 5.

The Stone-Campbell churches constitute only a small stream in the great flow of God's Kingdom on the earth. Some of the very language and terms of the intramural arguments and discussions which absorb us sound quite odd to the ears of many Christians today. Every tradition, of course, has its in-house discussions, its distinctive emphases, and (to the eyes of outsiders) odd practices. That's okay. Such issues are worth arguing about—up to a point. But it is long past time for all three of the Stone-Campbell traditions, not just the Disciples, to acknowledge and openly participate in the great stream of historic, trinitarian Christian faith, a stream variously muddied and polluted, to be sure, but a stream that nonetheless has proclaimed the love of the Father, known the grace of the Lord Jesus, and experienced the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Restorationists like Churches of Christ and Christian Churches are usually tempted to think of renewal as the return to or recovery of some past golden age that has slipped away. But Ray Anderson got it nearly right, I think, when he wrote that

the [renewed] church does not emerge out of its past. When it attempts to do this it resorts to strategies of resuscitation rather than experiencing the power of resurrection. In its attempts to be contemporary the church usually arrives a decade, if not a generation, too late. The renewed church emerges in the present out of its future. As in the case of everything related to the creative life and power of God, the future of the church exists first and then its present.¹³

This might be the best way to think about the future of the Restoration Movement. God's future. A future already secured by the triumph of the bloodied Lamb (Revelation 5), a triumph in which we see, by faith, how history will turn out. A future that, here and there, is breaking into the present. God's last work is forming, here and now in the course of earth's history, a new race of human beings, a race called out from every race. Human history's basic and last task is the forming of a new community on the earth. A community of the Lamb. Not market-driven, but mission-driven. Not an in-group mentality that frets over preserving its traditions, but an out-group mindset willing to lose itself for the sake of the coming kingdom. The Lamb's new nation will conquer, indeed, but by the very way of the Lamb, the very way that Jesus lived and died—triumph through a cross.

This is not Wal-Mart country. It is an outpost of the new Jerusalem.

This is our future. The only one that I can predict for sure.

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13. Ray Anderson, *Ministry on the Fireline: A Practical Theology for an Empowered Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993).