Assessing Our Heritage: Will our Faith Have Children?

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WILL OUR FAITH HAVE CHILDREN?

by Wendell Willis

This issue of LEAVEN is entitled the “Restoration Heritage” because we view our Christian ancestors with regard and appreciation for their work as a trust to be received, not as shackles to be broken. However, to assess and appropriate the Restoration heritage is not the same as assessing the church or the Bible, but it is to assess and appropriate a historical epoch and theology. God’s church existed prior to this historic 19th and 20th century movement in America to “restore” it, and we believe it will endure after it. The question is what value the Restoration heritage has today as a way to conceive, embody, and pass on the Christian faith.

It is difficult to evaluate one’s own family history, because personal feelings are involved (whether positively, negatively, or both). Moreover, time changes the understanding of key words, phrases, and ideas, so that to say the same thing is not necessarily to mean the same thing. So it is with the Restoration Movement. It is difficult to appreciate the situation in which the movement began, in such a way that we know the questions which were being asked and answered.

In the United States, within the last generation, we have shifted from a “Christian nation (at least in the public ideals) to “post-Christian” (in the same public mind). An understanding of this change is essential for doing theology in our day. This shift in the religious stance of America has been documented by many and certainly does not need to be argued again here. Whether one mourns this passing or rejoices, it is essential to recognize it.

Among other things, it suggests our situation today is similar to the beginning of the Stone-Campbell reform movements. Two important similarities are: Christians are increasingly a minority in a secular society, and many people are disillusioned with the religious options presented (witness the growth industry in “Bible churches”). Therefore there is good reason to think we may find much in the Restoration heritage to inform and instruct us today.

Challenges for the Coming Decade

1. We need to listen to and learn from critics of the Restoration heritage, both within and without. Undoubtedly, many critics are unfair, uninformed, and wrongly motivated. None of these facts, however, prevents their criticisms from being informative, or even helpful. Certainly it is easy to be defensive when we hear criticism. How-
ever, reacting is not helpful to us or others. As mature people we need to learn from our critics. What are some of the present criticisms of the Restoration churches? Only a few need be named.

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and there is no need to do research to ascertain their validity. Restoration churches are critiqued as too cold and lifeless, too worldly and secular, too sectarian and narrow minded, and not evangelistic or ministering. Examples can be presented to refute (or to illustrate!) each of these charges, but their continuing mention means we must regard them as truthful reactions and seek to understand better their causes. Then we need to consider whether the Restoration heritage is the cause of such problems or a possible aid to their correction.

2. **We need to learn to be questioned by the Bible, rather than assume it justifies us.** One of my college teachers used to remind his students that the Bible is an “anti-churchly” book, by which he meant the Bible does not celebrate what God’s people have become but calls them to account for what they have failed to be. In our history the temptation has often been to study and talk about those ideas where we feel we come out looking best (the weekly communion, immersion, congregational organization, etc.). We should not ignore those Bible truths we have been less successful in embodying (prayer, personal sanctification, service to the destitute, etc.).

3. **We need to recover the role of God in the Christian life.** Historically, the Restoration Movement has been rationalistic, as if everything important occurs in the human mind. We left little place in the Christian faith for feelings or imagination. Moreover, we tended to speak only of what humans ought to do, not of what God does. For example, while we taught much about adult immersion as Christian baptism—we said little about what God does in baptism—a central point in the New Testament itself.

4. **We need to act more Christian while we think more Biblically.** This is not to say activity is more important than thinking, that is to exchange theological reflection for “busyness,” rather it is to insist there must be a high correlation between informed theology and active discipleship. In his words to the man in Luke’s gospel, who inquired about having eternal life, Jesus approves his understanding of theology, then replies, “Do this and you will live.”

**Some Gains from the Restoration Heritage**

1. Perhaps the most important gain in the Restoration heritage is also what seems most at risk in the present time. It is the importance of the church for Christian faith. In American religious history the Restoration Movement, as well as the Roman Catholic Church, has emphasized the centrality of the church as the locus of God’s work in the world.

The contrary view has characterized American Protestantism, which has fundamentally understood Christianity from the perspective of the individual (“make your personal decision”), so the significant relationship is between the individual believer and Jesus. The church is largely understood as an option for extra credit. This theological approach is why a large number of Protestants regard themselves as committed Christians but only attend church gatherings one or two times annually.

How the church is essential for faith is worthy of a separate article, but it must not be neglected. There appears to be a minimizing of the role of the church in Churches of Christ today. This can be illustrated in many places by current trends in baptism in many places. Very often it is not clear that the one baptized is also identifying with that church—either to the baptized or the congregation!

2. A second gain of the Restoration heritage is the importance of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and it derives from the previous point. It is interesting to note that the idea of a weekly communion has found increasing support in many religious affiliations today, as well as by a number of modern theologians. While it is difficult for non-Catholics to appreciate, the Roman church’s most significant changes in over 1,000 years have been in relation to its theology of the communion. The idea of a “mass” as a re-doing of Jesus’ death, hence a “sacrifice,” has been minimized. Also allowing members to partake of the communion in both bread and wine is a major change intended to stress the communal nature of
the Supper. So it appears that the Restoration emphasis upon a weekly communion is an important gain.

Similarly, immersion of adults as the most faithful portrayal of baptism is increasingly supported outside our own heritage. However, some in the Restoration traditions presented baptism as a human work necessary for salvation (humans are passive: we just submit to God) and often left the impression that baptism was the most significant part of Christian theology (largely a point from debates). In so doing other key points were neglected.

Our past arguments with Baptist doctrine were largely mis-placed. They were not over immersion or the purpose of immersion (as Rubel Shelly has recently documented). The real debate was over the importance of the church. American individualism, which supports the Baptist view of salvation as “making a decision for Jesus,” also suggests that a relationship with the church is optional—although desirable. The Restoration heritage relates baptism to incorporation into Christ’s body, the church. A generation ago most baptism occurred in the context of the church gathered for worship—so that this event was tied to our corporate life. Today, baptisms frequently occur privately (often before or after worship) and are by invitation only. Any connection to the church is unstated and often unintended. (We are often unsure whether the new Christian has become a member of any congregation or has “membership at large.”)

3. Another gain from the Restoration heritage is the emphasis upon the obligation (and privilege) of each believer to study the Bible itself (rather than beginning with confessional summaries and creeds). The Restoration pioneers often ended their articles in religious periodicals with the phrase, “what think ye, brethren?”—an implicit invitation to do one’s own study of Scripture on the topic. While this freedom for personal Bible study will inevitably lead to some unusual and even heretical conclusions by some, it still makes clear the primacy of Scripture in theological discussion.

Here too, it may be that in Churches of Christ this gain is slipping through our fingers. One reason for my fear, for example, is that often I (and other ministers, I assume) get phone calls from members asking, “What do we believe about _?_?” They are not just asking for help in locating a verse they can’t exactly recall. Too often the motive is to have a canned “our view” answer for a neighbor or relative. We should recall that the Bereans were termed “noble” not because they were right on most topics but because they were searching the Scriptures themselves.

4. Finally, I would mention the congregational life of each body of believers. The independent congregational government has many difficulties. For example, charlatans can go from one unknowing congregation to another without being discovered. Individual congregations can be led astray by powerful teachers or controlled by wealthy donors. Nonetheless, this polity permits and encourages each congregation to be the church where it is, with the wisdom of the leaders God has granted it. This allows adaptation and change—with all the dangers both bring.

But anyone who has worked for a large bureaucracy (a metropolitan school district, a large business, or government) knows that often there is too great a gap between where decisions are made and where they must be implemented. Congregationalism makes decision making a more manage-
that beliefs make a difference, it would seem logical
that one might consider others wrong who do not
have similar beliefs. However, I don’t think a
judgmental attitude is inevitable (as it certainly was
not found in the early Restoration leaders).

Perhaps we have developed this attitude as a
result of focusing on correct doctrine as a means
of self-justification. If a right relationship with God is
dependent upon full accuracy of theological under-
standing and expression, then people may easily be
led to argue passionately against those whose dis-
agreements seem to endanger their own salvation.
Perhaps this judgmental attitude was also supple-
mented by a debating stance, when the desire to win
overshadowed fairness and consideration of others.
I well remember one of my college friends who
agreed with the Restoration position were either
either stupid (they could not follow simple Scriptural arguments) or insincere (they could follow them, but
would not change). When he met people who were
brighter than and as sincere as he, he had no box in
which to put them, and his faith in the Restoration
heritage perished.

2. Another loss is a sectarian stance in which the
church is narrowly conceived as those who agree
with us (me?) on every significant issue. Again, this
is not to imply that this attitude is universal within
congregations and/or leaders. The question is
whether the attitude is a correlate to the Restoration
heritage. Here the reading of any good history of the
movement will show that this attitude is not a
necessary inheritance—although it has often been a
threat.

Indeed, one can see that the sectarian attitude
that seeks to draw tighter and more narrow the
boundaries of fellowship was precisely what Thomas
and Alexander Campbell opposed within their Pres-
byterian heritage. The plea “Not the only Christians,
Christians only” capsulizes much of the Restoration
emphasis on unity among all believers. This was a
major emphasis of Barton Stone and the “Chris-
tians” movement, although his emphasis upon unity
has not been widely continued. Also, anti-sectari-
anism is not an attitude restricted to the first gen-
eration of the Restoration Movement; it is also
embodied in figures such as David Lipscomb, F. D.
Srygley, and Reuel Lemmons.

A sectarian stance that defines the church as
only those in full agreement with “my reading of the
Bible” becomes almost silly when doctrinal divisions
are exported to mission points. Thus even in foreign
lands we divide over means of supporting orphans or
Christian education when those institutions do not
exist. Ironically, this is exactly what the Campbells
experienced in America when the divisions in Scottish
Presbyterianism (burgher vs. anti-burgher) were
exported to a nation where neither option existed!

3. Another loss is that too often the danger of
sectarianism has been coupled with an increasing
secularism, relegating faith to selected “religious
topics.” This leaves the remainder of our lives as
problems to be faced without reference to Christ. In
our secular society, it is tempting for the church to
seldom consider God as a major factor in dealing
with personal or corporate life.

One good illustration of this tendency to secu-
larism is the familiar joke about a minister who
received an invitation to move to a church which
offered a major increase in salary. The man explained
the offer to his wife and said, “I think we should pray
about this.” The wife replied, “That’s fine, you pray
and I’ll pack.” Apparently she could anticipate her
husband’s decision prior to his prayer. I tell this
story not to critique ministers, or their oft-suffering
spouses, but to suggest that we all have difficulty
keeping God in mind—even when planning to work
for the church.

It would be nice if a deeper awareness of God
could be developed or encouraged with a simple
procedure. However, that is not the case and there
are two major reasons why. The first is that a
relationship with God cannot be nurtured with
mechanics. The second is that the wish to find a
“plan” or a “system” to do so merely betrays how
deeply we are caught in secular pragmatism.

But again, is this a result of the Restoration
heritage, or is it a necessary accompaniment? Actu-
ally, many different authors from a variety of reli-
gious traditions have made the same charge about
their religious bodies in recent years. The Resto-
ration churches have fared no worse, although per-
haps no better, in the struggle with the seculariza-
tion of American culture. But it does seem that the
Restoration heritage, which is able to talk about
resources that will enable us to struggle with secu-
larization.

4. Finally, it appears that a major loss in recent
decades is our inability to commend our faith to
others including our children. For those who came
from a judgmental and sectarian expression of the
Restoration heritage, but have ceased to be supportive
of that approach, it often seems as if little is said to
others about becoming a Christian. The paradox is
this expression of faith (and it is a genuine expres-
sion of faith for many) is too sectarian to commend
convincingly and contentiously to others, but the
worldly and secular faith, often now embodied in
many churches, has too little importance either to
Willimon cites the comment of Alasdair MacIntyre that for the non-Christian of our day the message presented as the gospel too often is uninteresting. It does not ask enough to imply that it offers anything. This is one of the dangers with some current interests in presenting the gospel in culturally acceptable forms, tailored to varied interest groups of American society. If the gospel appears as society has affirmed it but is accompanied with prayer and singing, the lost may well ask, "Why go to the trouble?"

This problem is not native or necessary to the Restoration heritage, but it is a problem with all expressions of faith in a secular culture. Rather, the Restoration emphasis upon the revelation of God, the promise of the gospel, and the instructions on Christian living offers a potential to redirect and challenge a faith that demands too little of potential adherents.

**Conclusion**

Certainly each of the points made in this essay could benefit from more careful statement and nuancing, and I hope the broad strokes have not unfairly represented any person or belief. Whether the points are convincing will probably vary from reader to reader, but I hope before too many children of the Restoration heritage decide to sever the traditions that nurtured them to faith they will at least go to the trouble of knowing those traditions better. It is one of the great advantages of a Restoration Movement that we are not obligated to restore our earlier discoveries but the church pictured in the Bible as God intended it to be—and that goal merits continuing study and discussion.