

1-1-1993

Assessing Our Heritage: Will our Faith Have Children?

Wendell Willis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Willis, Wendell (1992) "Assessing Our Heritage: Will our Faith Have Children?," *Leaven*: Vol. 2: Iss. 3, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol2/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

ASSESSING OUR HERITAGE

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 many¹ 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 disenchanted 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-

Wendell Willis is Involvement Minister for the South National Church of Christ in Springfield, MO.

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,

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.

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.² 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).³ 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-

One loss is the development of a judgmental attitude toward others. It is not just that others have accused us of being judgmental, it is that many members have accepted this charge as true

able task.

Some Losses—From the Restoration Heritage

There are various ways to evaluate any human group, churches included, and there are many faults to consider. For example, we can assess how well we have lived up to our ideals/theology or how ideals/theology compare with others, etc. What I propose to consider under the heading of “losses” are trends and attitudes that have occurred in Churches of Christ, which some have critiqued as failings of the Restoration heritage.

1. One loss is the development of a judgmental attitude toward others. It is not just that others have accused us of being judgmental, it is that many members have accepted this charge as true. Insofar as this is accurate, is it inevitable with a Restoration heritage? In some ways it may be. If one is convinced

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.⁴ If a right relationship with God is dependent upon full accuracy of theological understanding and expression, then people may easily be led to argue passionately against those whose disagreements seem to endanger their own salvation. Perhaps this judgmental attitude was also supplemented by a debating stance, when the desire to win overshadowed fairness and consideration of others. I well remember one of my college friends who gained the impression that all preachers who disagreed with the Restoration position were 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 Presbyterian 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 "Christians" movement, although his emphasis upon unity has not been widely continued. Also, anti-sectarianism is not an attitude restricted to the first generation 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.⁵

One good illustration of this tendency to secularism 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? Actually, many different authors from a variety of religious traditions have made the same charge about their religious bodies in recent years.⁶ The Restoration churches have fared no worse, although perhaps no better, in the struggle with the secularization of American culture. But it does seem that the Restoration heritage, which is able to talk about community and obligation to God, has some of those resources that will enable us to struggle with secularization.

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 expression 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

take seriously or to teach others.

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.⁷