

WALKING IN THE OLD PATHS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 20, 1966 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Time was when such names as Wycliffe, Zwingli, Huss, Luther, Calvin, and Knox were household words. These men tried diligently to pierce the darkness that had settled upon the church during the Middle Ages. These men are known as the Reformers. Their efforts to reform certain abuses in the church led to the beginning in the 16th century of the great Reformation Movement.

But I speak today of another movement--a movement that was not and is not an attempt to reform but a movement to restore--not an effort to reform the 16th century church or the church of any century, but an effort to rebuild from the original foundations the original church as the Lord gave it to man in the first century. This Restoration Movement goes far beyond the work of the Reformation Movement. Its goal is the unity of all believers in Christ. Its basis is the inspired word of God, the New Testament. Its method is the restoration of the New Testament church.

The plea of these pioneers of the faith led their hearers back to the scriptures, as was true of the Bereans of old when they listened to the apostle Paul. The inspired historian Luke says of these ancient Macedonians, "Now these were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, examining the scriptures daily, whether these things were so." (Acts 17:11). This movement was a protest against human creeds and human organizations, with their assumption of authority over the minds of men. Human creeds and traditions were discarded in favor of the gospel alone which is, as Paul said, "the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." (Rom. 1:16). ‘

A Spontaneous Grass-Roots Movement

During those early times when the opening guns of the Restoration Movement were being fired, a series of apparently unrelated efforts on both sides of the Atlantic began to bring men of different religious backgrounds together. Their common meeting ground was the gospel of Christ as found in the New Testament. In Scotland, Robert and James Haldane called for acceptance of the sufficiency of the New Testament alone, and insisted on doing away with all man-made creeds. In Wales, J. R. Jones preached the same powerful message. In Ireland, it was Alexander Carson whose voice was heard.

In America voices were being raised in many sections calling for all men to return to the scriptures as the only safe guide to heaven. In North Carolina, James O'Kelly dreamed and preached of universal unity based exclusively on the gospel of Christ as set forth in the scriptures---with no additions and no deletions. In Kentucky, Barton W. Stone was engaged in a similar endeavor, along with at least half a dozen other prominent frontier preachers. They spoke of the Bible as "the only sure guide to heaven." In New England, Abner Jones and Elias Smith, who were circuit-riding preachers, were disturbed "concerning sectarian names and creeds." They advocated a return to the pure New Testament gospel. In Pennsylvania and West Virginia, the influence of the voice and the pen of Thomas Campbell, the beloved Scotsman, was being felt, emphasizing the same general theme.

The amazing fact is that this general grass-roots movement, embracing prominent voices in at least half a dozen of the largest churches or denominations of the day, was spontaneous. In the beginning years of this movement--175 to 200 years ago--these men did not even know about each other. Travel and communication were very limited, and it was not for many years that the widespread nature of the Restoration Movement became apparent.

A Felt Need

These men of the different churches felt the need for unity among all sincere believers in Christ and independently they were saying, "Let's all go back to the scriptures in order to be united." This realization of the need for Christian unity grew out of such key passages of scripture as that found in John 17:20-21, where the Lord prayed, "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me."

Another passage of outspoken emphasis upon the importance of unity is that found in I Cor. 1:10-13, where the apostle Paul reproved the incipient divisions that were beginning even in the first century to plague the church, "Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye all be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been signified unto me concerning you, my brethren, by them that are of the household of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I mean, that each one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized into the name of Paul?"

The chief features of the Restoration Movement are these, "(1) The New Testament is the only authoritative rule of faith and practice. (2) All human creeds must be renounced and the acceptance of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the only creed binding upon Christians.

(3) The apostolic New Testament church must be restored with its ordinances and life as originally practiced in apostolic times.” (*The Restoration Handbook*, Thomas, pp. 7-8).

Because of the tragic religious divisions of their day the men of the Restoration championed the idea of the Bible as the only authority in religion, and used the motto: “In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty; in all things, love.” By matters of faith they meant things clearly taught in the scriptures. By matters of opinion they meant matters that were left to the judgment of Christians. In all things they insisted upon an attitude of charity or love.

Speak and Be Silent

In a momentous meeting in 1807 Thomas Campbell, after pointing out the evils of religious division, said, “God has provided, in his sacred word, an infallible standard which is all-sufficient and alone-sufficient as the basis for the uniting of all Christians.” A little later he brought his exhortation to a ringing climax with the words, “That rule, my highly respected hearers, is this, that where the scriptures speak, we speak; and where the scriptures are silent, we are silent!” Mr. Campbell then sat down.

Although there was a buzz of conversation, no one seemed willing to comment aloud. Finally, a Scotsman named Andrew Munro arose and said, “Mr. Campbell, if we adopt that as a basis then there is an end of infant baptism!” Campbell replied, “Of course, if infant baptism be not found in the scriptures, we can have nothing to do with it.” At this juncture, Thomas Acheson, a man of warm impulses, leaped to his feet and shouted, “I hope I may never see the day when my heart will renounce that blessed saying of the scripture, “Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” It was then that James Foster, a man of strong convictions who was also strongly analytical and perceptive, refused to allow Acheson’s misapplication of scripture to go unchallenged. Foster cried out, “Mr. Acheson, I would remark that in the portion of scripture that you have quoted there is no reference to infant baptism.”

In connection with this incident, the Restoration historian Robert Richardson wrote, “Thus the silence of the Bible was to be respected equally with its revelations ... Anything more, then, must be an encumbrance. Anything less than ‘whole counsel’ of God would be a dangerous deficiency. Simply, reverentially, confidingly, they would speak of Bible things in Bible words, adding nothing thereto and omitting nothing given by inspiration.” (*Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, Richardson, Book I, p. 237).

Two action-packed years later, Thomas Campbell wrote the now famous “Declaration and Address.” It was Campbell’s purpose, in writing this document, to set forth clearly and logically the purposes of the movement in which he and his associates were engaged. It should be emphasized as strongly as possible that the “Declaration and Address” was not the constitution of any church existing then or now. Its sole purpose was to promote “simple evangelical Christianity such as is expressly exhibited upon the sacred page; without inculcating anything of human authority, or of private opinion or of inventions of men, as having any place in the constitution, faith, or worship of the church; or anything as matters of Christian faith or duty for which there cannot be expressly produced a ‘thus saith the Lord;’ either in express terms or by approved precedent.” (*Pioneer Sermons and Addresses*, Rowe, pp. 14-15).

Campbell then mentioned thirteen propositions which he prefaced with these words, “Our desire, therefore, for ourselves and for our brethren, would be that rejecting human opinion and the inventions of men, as of any authority, or as of having any place in the church of God, we might forever cease from further contentions about such things; returning to, and holding fast by the original standards; taking the divine word along for our rule; the Holy Spirit for our teacher and guide, to lead us into all truth; and Christ alone as exhibited in the word, for our salvation, that, by so doing, we may be at peace among ourselves, follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.”

Among the thirteen propositions were these: “The church of Christ is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one ... The Bible is the only rule of faith and practice for Christians ... No human authority has power to amend or change the original constitution and laws of the church ... Division among Christians is anti-Christian, anti-scriptural, unnatural and to be abhorred ... Neglect of the real will of God and the introduction of human innovations are and have been causes of all the corruptions and divisions that have ever taken place in the church of God.”

Not Yet Fully Comprehended

Almost immediately after this “Declaration and Address” Thomas Campbell’s son, Alexander, arrived in America from Scotland. He was to become the brightest figure of the Restoration Movement. He was a close personal friend of the President of the United States, James Madison. On one occasion he delivered a sermon from John 3:16, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life,” to a rare joint-session of the U. S. Senate and House of Representatives. It was he who defended the Christian faith in public debate against the world’s foremost atheist, the Englishman Robert Owen.

None of these men comprehended fully all that was involved in the new principle which they had committed themselves to uphold: “To speak where the Bible speaks and to be silent where the Bible is silent.” Having committed themselves to “have a thus saith the Lord” for everything, they now were beginning to see how far-reaching this principle was. This is seen in a very intimate experience

of the Campbell family. In 1812, Alexander and his wife Margaret had their first child, a baby girl. The problem arose as to whether to christen or baptize this infant or not to do so. They searched the scriptures and found no example of infant baptism and no commandment for infant baptism. In every case of New Testament baptism they discovered that it was a believer who was baptized. The gospel had been preached, and the subject of baptism had believed, repented, and made known his faith in the Lord.

As a result of this restudy of the scriptures, they decided that they could not baptize their own baby daughter. It was a very short step, then, to the realization that if it were not scriptural to baptize this baby, their own baptism in infancy had not been scriptural. After much soul-searching, on Wednesday, June 12, 1812, Alexander, his wife, his father and mother and three others met on the banks of the old Buffalo Creek, near Washington, Pa. and were baptized in the New Testament manner. Alexander had already been preaching for a score of years and his father had been preaching for almost half a century at this time.

I have glanced through the writings of these pioneers of faith and have noted the scriptures they used most often. Here are a few: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." (I Pet. 4:11). "What saith the scriptures?" (Rom. 4:3). "What is written ... how readest thou?" (Luke 10:26). "Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work." (II Tim. 3:16-17). "Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth." (II Tim. 2:15). "If ye abide in my word, then are ye truly my disciples; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:31-32). "Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son." (II John 9).

On one occasion Alexander Campbell proclaimed eloquently and insistently, "We have no system of our own, or of others, to substitute in lieu of the reigning systems. We only aim at substituting the New Testament in lieu of every creed in existence, whether Mohammedan, Pagan, Jewish, or Presbyterian." (You see, Campbell had been of the Presbyterian persuasion). "We wish to call Christians to consider that Jesus Christ has made them kings and priests to God. We neither advocate Calvinism, Deism, or Sectarianism, but New Testamentism." (*Christian Baptist*, A. Campbell, Vol. I, p. 89).

At another time he said, "Am I asked why I am not a party man? or why I do not join some party? I ask, in return, which party would the apostle Paul join if he were now on earth? or which party would receive him? I dare not be a party man ... because Christ has forbidden me. He has commanded us to keep the 'unity of the spirit' to 'love each other with a pure heart fervently.'" (*Memoirs*, Book I. p. 353).

Conclusion

Obviously, it was not the purpose of these pioneer preachers to preach a new system or to start a new church. They simply wanted all believers in Christ to join hands and hearts in going back to Christ and his original church. Although we who are part of this continuing Restoration Movement are sometimes called by the appellation "Campbellites," we deny the validity of any such designation. It is our intention to bypass all of these men, and go all the way back to Christ and his church. Just as we are grateful for Luther, Calvin, Knox and the rest of the Reformers, so we are grateful for these men of the Restoration Movement, but we would miss the entire point if we made any or all of these men our religious leaders. We follow them only as they follow Christ.

The spirit of Jeremiah was apparent in these early Restoration preachers, as we read his statement in Jer. 6:16, "Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way: and walk therein and ye shall find rest for your souls." Our only desire is to walk in the "old paths" as set forth by our Lord and his apostles.