



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Simply Christians: Seeking God's Ideal Today

Luke 8:11

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Introduction

1. Over the years, I have collected statements from different authors who call for Christian unity and/or emphasize the importance of following the New Testament in order to achieve unity and be the church God intended. A favorite comes from John Stott:

True unity will always be unity in truth, and truth means biblical truth. If only church leaders would sit down with their Bibles, would distinguish clearly between apostolic traditions (which are biblical) and ecclesiastical traditions (which are not), and would agree to subordinate the latter to the former by requiring the former of each other but giving each other liberty over the latter, immediate and solid advance could be made. (John R. W. Stott, *Christ the Controversialist*, 87).
2. It seems that we have seen more statements like these and efforts to do what Stott suggests over the last two or three decades. We need only note the number of groups who identify themselves as "non-denominational." (I counted 102 in the Memphis Yellow Pages.)
3. This interest in "non-denominational Christianity" ought to excite us.
 - a. Historically, we are part of a heritage that has been calling for believers to leave denominationalism in favor of the Bible alone for more than two *centuries*!¹
 - b. So, you would think that we would be excited to see the current trend and would, in the manner of Stone and Campbell in the early 1800s, be interested in opening communication with them in hopes of realizing the unity called for in the New Testament.
4. But we have not universally embraced such appeals; indeed, we suspect that most of those involved in the non-denominational² movement probably do not know our history with a similar appeal.
 - a. As Monroe Hawley said decades ago: "For some time I have been concerned that we in the heritage of the Restoration Movement have to a large degree lost our appreciation of the

¹ In our heritage, Barton Stone's *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* (1804) and Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address* (1809) are perhaps the most prominent early examples of this call for a return to Scripture.

² I would argue that "undenominational" is preferable to "non-denominational." The latter often reflects more of a desire to just be independent than to reject the notion of denominationalism outright. My point, however, is that the "non-denominational" movement (or perhaps better, trend) is a major step toward what our heritage has been saying for two centuries. Perhaps more than at any time since the time of Stone and the Campbells, we live in a society poised to hear the "back to the Bible" call we've stood for so long.

undenominational plea. Some have frankly abandoned the idea as unworkable while others give it lip service by failing to accept its implications.... There is a gap between our teaching and our practice...." (Monroe E. Hawley, *Redigging the Wells: Seeking Undenominational Christianity*, 7).

- b. The reasons for the current situation are numerous and complex, but include the following:
 - i. We've seen the need to talk about other things and so have not talked as much about this theme (perhaps assuming we had settled it?).
 - ii. Some have abandoned the idea, either because they think it is not feasible or because they have adopted a sectarian attitude.³
5. We need to reverse course and again stress the principle of undenominational Christianity.
 - a. We need to do this because it's right and should be pursued.
 - b. We need to do it because it's vital for our faithfulness to the word; it's harder to drift if we are consciously seeking to "speak where the Bible speaks."
6. The process begins by making sure we know what it means to be "simply christians" in pursuit of "God's ideal today." Three things will help us clarify our understanding.

Body

I. A Call to Christ and His Word.

A. Learning from the practice of some diligent students.

1. In the middle part of the 19th century, Alexander Campbell made a trip to England. He went because a group of believers had invited him. A short time before, they had been given a copy of an issue of the *Millennial Harbinger*, the paper Campbell edited. They found its content thrilling, not because it told them things about salvation and church life that they didn't know, but because it told them things they already knew. You see, they were a group of people who a few years before had determined to leave behind all denominational ties and turn to the Bible to ascertain God's will for salvation and living as his body. Completely independent from Campbell, or anyone else involved with the "American Restoration Movement," they had learned and were practicing the truth through study and application of God's word.⁴

B. What one has to know in order to be a New Testament Christian is the New Testament.

1. Though I have spoken of our historical heritage with regard to being simply Christians, it is important to understand that one does not have to have read Campbell, Stone, et.al., or even know who they were, to practice undenominational Christianity.
 - a) This is not to disparage what those men did, nor to suggest that we should not study and learn from both their successes and failures.
 - b) But they are not the source for our faith; God's word is (cf. Romans 10:17).
2. The foundational principle is suggested in Jesus' words in Luke 8:11.

³ In the paragraph cited above, Hawley also notes "the sectarian terminology which is frequently used" as evidence of his point.

⁴ I am indebted to Dr. Jerry Rushford for this story, told at the annual church leaders dinner at the Oklahoma Christian University lectures in January 2005 in a lecture entitled, "Heart and Mind of Restoration." The summary here is admittedly brief; as Dr. Rushford said, it "is accurate as far as it goes, but there was so much more to the story" (email correspondence, February 27, 2009).

- a) Where the seed is sown and people respond to it obediently with regard to salvation, they are Christians, even if they have never heard of anyone who did the same, whether Campbell, Stone, or "us."
- b) We have met some who have not understood this point and so insist that anyone not taught and immersed by one of "our" preachers, and ideally in one of "our" buildings (or at least activities), cannot be a Christian.
- c) Such attitudes make us wonder whether some really believe Paul's declaration that "the gospel ... is the power of God for salvation" (Romans 1:16).

II. A Call to What God Intends.

- A. We should acknowledge that some have challenged the idea of restoring New Testament Christianity by asking which of the imperfect churches we would restore.
 1. Jerusalem where Ananias and Sapphira were members, and where there was dissension over widows who were not being cared for (Acts 5, 6)?
 2. Corinth, whose members included and tolerated a fornicator (not to mention many other problems) (1 Corinthians 5)?⁵
 3. Rome, where there was quarreling over eating meat and special days (Romans 14, 15)?
 4. Or Philippi, where Euodia and Syntyche had their troubles (Philippians 4:2)?
- B. This question suggests that we might be better served if we spoke of "seeking God's ideal" instead of "restoration."
 1. Paul's letters to Rome and Corinth give us a clue in this respect.
 - a) Fourteen times, as he issued specific admonitions for them to correct some failing, he began with the question, "do you not know?" (Romans 6:3, 16; 7:1; 11:2; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 5:6; 6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19; 9:13, 24; cf. also James 4:4)
 - b) Leander Keck helps us see the significance of this point: "The Bible is a series of critiques of the communities for which it was written.... This is especially true in Paul's letters. Had the church in Corinth, for example, been developing properly he would not have written his letter to it. The letters of Paul are nothing less (though considerably more) than a trenchant critique of his own churches."⁶
 2. In other words, Paul was calling those churches to an ideal, to what God intended.
 - a) That is what we seek when we study the word.
 - b) To be consistent with our plea, we must be willing to study with minds that are open to correcting our course (whether individually or as a group) when we find we are "not in step with the truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:14, spoken of *Peter*).

III. A Call to a Journey More than an Arrival.

- A. It is easier to talk about the undenominational plea than it is to consistently live it.
 1. We all have a history, a viewpoint, and potential blind spots.
 - a) Where we first came to faith things were done a certain way.
 - b) Every place had merely human traditions (expedients) among their practices (if only the time selected to meet!).

⁵ It is of interest that of the 114 uses of *ekklesia* in the New Testament, thirty are in the books of 1 and 2 Corinthians, epistles written to counter the problems of a church where many today would not even visit, let alone place membership.

⁶ Leander Keck, "The Presence of God Through Scripture," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* X [1975]: 12, as quoted by James W. Thompson, "Hermeneutics Then and Now," *Christian Studies* 11 [1990]: 14.

- c) Sometimes, those human ways were assumed to always be God's ways.
- d) We now serve together in a setting where most of us did not start out.
- 2. So, to some extent, we have already had to work through the issue of ongoing study in search of God's ideals.
- B. We must never stop that effort.
 - 1. Jesus stressed to the apostles that they were not to bind where God had not bound nor loose where God had not loosed (Matthew 16:19; 18:18).
 - 2. That means that, as his followers, we have no choice but to make every effort to discern what is a tradition from God (which is biblical and must be bound) and what is merely human tradition (which is optional and must never be bound).
 - 3. This is not to say that we can never know any truth; it is to say that we must love the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:10) so much that we will always examine what we do in light of what the word teaches (cf. Acts 17:11).

Conclusion

- 1. In the movie *Apollo 13*, there are a few tense moments when the astronauts in their crippled vessel realize that they are off course and may well miss the earth completely. So they fire the rockets for a few seconds while Jim Lovell (played by Tom Hanks) aligns the ship with the earth and directs the burn. Back on course, they eventually make it back home.
- 2. In the "Foreword" to Hawley's *Redigging the Wells*, the late Reuel Lemmons used a similar illustration and then wrote: "The church was launched on the day of Pentecost. Through the centuries that followed its trajectory changed as various influences were brought to bear upon it. It is necessary for us to check its course constantly lest the church miss its mark completely. If its trajectory is constantly corrected by honest application of scripture, it will succeed in the purpose for which it was planned. We do not feel that the church has any chance of succeeding in its purpose unless the restoration principle is carefully adhered to. To ignore that principle is to insure apostasy" (in Hawley, 11).
- 3. From this, it should be obvious that nothing is more fundamentally a "thing we should believe" than the intent to align our lives with God's word. Let us press on in that quest. And if today you know of an area where you have missed the mark and need our assistance, we hope you'll let us know.

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* Note: much of the above was originally presented as part of an article by the same title in *First Century Christian*. For the points included in this outline, see the first installment, published May-June 2001, pp. 1, 4-5.