



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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Reflections on the Idea of Restoration

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From time to time, we have heard the call to restore the New Testament church challenged by an appeal to the imperfections of New Testament churches. For example, we are reminded that Jerusalem had its Ananias and Sapphira, Corinth its fornicator, Rome its disputes over eating meat, and so on. Even Philippi, perhaps the most trouble free of the Pauline churches, had its Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2). “Which church,” we are asked, “would you restore?”

Our response depends upon the inquirer’s intent. If he means to point out that there was no perfect church in the New Testament period, we are, of course, forced to agree, for as we have already noticed, the New Testament is quite candid about failings in those ancient churches. Such failings cause one to at least question whether the term “restoration” is the best word to describe our goal in calling for people to be *New Testament* Christians. Certainly we do not want to see a church where lying is condoned, or one where a man is allowed to have his father’s wife without any challenge from his fellow believers. Our goal is to match God’s glory (cf. Rom 3:23), not endorse imperfection, whether the imperfection is restored or invented. Perhaps, then, we should adjust our speech to say that our interest is in *being* the church as God intended, no more and no less. If such sharpening of our plea results from our challenger’s inquiry, then he will have served us well.

But we are not at all sure that all who issue this challenge are merely calling us to reflect upon the meaning of the term “restoration.” Some seem skeptical of the very idea that we can know God’s intent for the church. Our response in that case would be quite different. We find the following statement helpful in clarifying the point:

The Bible is a series of critiques of the communities for which it was written. Had the faith of Israel been on target the prophets would not have denounced it. The prophets are a protest against the prevailing faith and life of Israel. In the same way, the New Testament is a critique of early Christianity. 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. (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).

Keck challenges us to see that the very fact that Paul could call churches to account for failing to meet a standard is evidence that such a standard existed. We can extend his point by pointing out that when the writers make statements showing approval of various beliefs, teachings and actions, they are again demonstrating that there is a divine ideal to which people of all ages can be directed as they seek to follow God through Christ. Dating back to Alexander Campbell in our heritage, that call has revolved around the word “restoration.” This is true primarily because Campbell initially saw his task in terms of calling Christians who were fragmented by creeds and denominational allegiances to unite on the basis of New Testament documents which predated their creeds and to which nearly all professed allegiance.

It is in the hope of seeing God’s intent realized that we use the word “restoration.” Perhaps, as already suggested, we can do better at expressing that ideal. But we do not believe we can do better than to call people, and the churches they collectively constitute, to be what God intended in the days when he first revealed his will about the church. So long as we or any others fall short of that ideal, the plea must made.

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