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"The Restoration Principle": A Critical Analysis

Roy B. Ward

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RESTORATION QUARTERLY

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"The Restoration Principle": A Critical Analysis

Roy B. Ward

Introduction

In 1804 Barton W. Stone and five other preachers determined to dissolve the Springfield Presbytery. In "The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery" was included an item: "We will, that the people henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven . . ." ¹ Five years later Thomas Campbell published the "Declaration and Address" for the Christian Association of Washington, Pennsylvania. Campbell wrote:

Our desire therefore, for ourselves and our brethren would be, that rejecting human opinions and inventions of men as of any authority, or as 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 standard; taking the Divine word alone for our rule . . . ²

From these historical beginnings there came a movement to restore New Testament Christianity, using only the Bible as authoritative. The principle of this Restoration Movement soon became captured in the motto "Back to the Bible."

Generally speaking, the validity of the Restoration Principle appears to have been taken for granted by most within the Restoration Movement. The motto "Back to the Bible" has been effective, especially among Protestants who already stood in the tradition of Luther's *sola scriptura*. A thorough critical analysis of the Restoration Principle is certainly appropriate if this principle is to be taken seriously. ³ However, the nature of the task is one that should involve the joint work of men trained in several disciplines: biblical studies, church history in general, American church history in particular, theology and philosophy. This article is written from the viewpoint of NT studies and ancient church history. It is offered as a suggestive problematic essay, not as the definitive solution.

Explicit Textual Basis for the Restoration Principle

In the spirit of the Restoration Movement, it should be appropriate to begin from a NT point of view. But if one starts exclusively with the NT, certain problems immediately present themselves. Nowhere does the NT provide explicit scriptural basis for the Restoration Principle—that is, there is no text within the NT which states explicitly that later generations should go "Back to the Bible,"

¹Quoted in C. A. Young (ed.), *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union* (1904), p. 21.

²*Ibid.*, p. 71.

³Recent analyses include A. T. DeGroot, *The Restoration Principle* (1960) and R. E. Osborn, et al. (eds.), *The Renewal of the Church* 3 vols.

nor are there examples of this principle at work within the NT material (since the NT *qua* NT did not yet exist).⁴

Appeal has been made to texts which employ such terms as *euaggelion*, *logos*, *didache*, etc., as providing the rationale. The assumption that these texts explicitly support the Restoration Principle is probably due in large measure to the contemporary use of the terms "Gospel," "the word," and "doctrine" as synonyms for the "New Testament." But this usage is nowhere to be seen in the texts of the NT itself. *Euaggelion* in the NT (e.g., Rom 1:16; I Cor 15:1; etc.) always refers to a message preached, not to a book or collection of books⁵—nor even to the broad range of contents included in the NT.⁶ The term *logos* has a wider range of meanings,⁷ referring sometimes to Jesus (John 1:1), the Christian message (= *euaggelion*) (Acts 6:2; I Cor 14:36; etc.), etc. Where *logos* refers to books, usually the reference is to the OT, and the term *logos* is modified in such a way as to make the reference clear: "the word of Isaiah" (John 12:38); "the word which is written in the Law" (John 15:25); "the prophetic word" (2 Pet 1:19); "the word which is written" (I Cor 15:54); "the words of the prophets" (Acts 15:15); "the words of Isaiah" (Lk 3:4). In addition, the contents of one book in the NT, the Revelation to John, is referred to as "words of prophecy" (Rev 1:3) and "the words of this book" (Rev 22:7; etc.).

The expression *didache tou christou* in 2 John 9 is sometimes used to support the Restoration Principle, but this passage is ill-chosen. A. J. Malherbe has shown that this text was directed against docetic heretics who denied that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh. Malherbe thus paraphrases: "Everyone who is so progressive that he does not continue to hold the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ does not have a knowledge of God."⁸

At this point a historical question ought to be raised. Did the early Restoration leaders begin the movement because they found the Restoration Principle in the NT or because they were reacting to a certain historical situation, *viz.*, disunity among those who called

⁴In the OT there are examples of reformations, such as those under Hezekiah and Josiah. None of these were radical restorations, and caution should be used in any premature pressing of OT examples on the NT material. See my comments on Jer 6:16 in "Is the Restoration Principle Valid?" in J. Scott (ed.), *New Testament Christianity: The Message for Modern Man* (1965), p. 55.

⁵The first usage of *euaggelion* referring to a book is to be found in *Didache* 8:2 and 2 Clement 8:5. In neither case does it refer to the whole of the NT.

⁶Cf. G. Friedrich, "*euaggelizomai*, ktl.," *Theological Word Book of the New Testament*, II, 727-736.

⁷Cf. W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (ET, 1957), s. v.; A. Debrunner, et al., "*lego*, ktl.," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, IV, 69-197.

⁸A. J. Malherbe, "Through the Eye of the Needle: 'The Doctrine of Christ,'" *RQ* (1962), 15 and *passim*.

themselves Christians?⁹ Historical documents, such as the Last Will and Testament, the Declaration and Address, and numerous other sources would seem to suggest that the latter was the case. Faced with such problems, they employed the Bible to achieve their purposes, but it may be questioned whether or not the initial impetus to the movement came simply from a discovery of the Restoration Principle within the text of the NT.

Another group of NT texts which speak in general of a "falling away" have been employed to provide a rationale for the Restoration Principle. These texts have functioned thus: a) the NT foresees a falling away; b) this necessarily means that a restoration is called for; c) the NT should be the criterion for this restoration. The Restorers identified this "falling away" with developments within church history which produced the Roman Catholic Church and later the various Protestant denominations.

From a NT point of view certain objections must be raised. The expression "falling away" appears in the KJV of 2 Thess 2:3 (*apostasia*; RSV=rebellion). The prediction of *apostasia* appears here in apocalyptic material,¹⁰ which always assumes that the righteous will have a continuing existence until the end, despite the *apostasia*. Furthermore, in this text the *apostasia* is an eschatological event linked with the man of lawlessness, immediately preceding the Day of the Lord. There is no suggestion that a restoration movement in history is to take place after the *apostasia* and prior to the Day of the Lord. Such an interpretation would be a drastic demythologization of this apocalyptic material.

Other texts such as Acts 20:29; 1 Tim 4:1; 2 Tim 4:1ff. predict heresy. In the Pastorals this heresy appears to be related to the early Christian heresy of Gnosticism.¹¹ But in any case, none of these texts predict a wholesale departure; all assume that some will continue to preserve sound doctrine. These texts do suggest rather explicitly that future historical developments (departures by some) are to be tested by a criterion. But they do not point explicitly to the NT *qua* NT as the criterion. In the Pastorals "sound doctrine" is the criterion, but this expression appears to refer to oral *didache* which is passed on—in this case, from Paul to Timothy and Titus.¹² To argue that this "sound doctrine" became embodied in the NT requires going beyond the text of the NT itself.

⁹Cf. the observations of J. Smith, "Notes on Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address," *RQ* 5 (1961), pp. 113-118.

¹⁰As it does in other apocalyptic material; cf. also 1 Enoch 91:7; Jubilees 23:14ff; 4 Ezra 5:1ff; Matt. 24:10ff.

¹¹Although these passages are stated in a predictive form, the question may be raised whether or not the heresy is not already present. This does not necessitate a late date for these texts, since gnostic tendencies are already clearly present during Paul's ministry. Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles* (1963), pp. 10ff. and *ad loc.*

¹²Thus *he paratheke* (1 Tim. 6:20) and *paratithemi* (1 Tim 1:18; 2 Tim 2:2) is the language of oral transmission; see Bauer, *op. cit.*, s. v.

Another Approach

Even if no explicit textual basis can be found for the Restoration Principle, another approach is possible. This approach involves an understanding of the nature of Christianity as such.

To use the language of the science of the History of Religions, Christianity falls under the category of a "historical religion." In other words, Christianity is a religion in which the decisive manifestation of God and his will for man is found in historical events—events that occur at specific times and places. These events are necessarily anchored in that past time when they occurred.

Historical religions differ fundamentally from other types.¹³ There are religions of nature which see god in the dying and rising of the seasons and in the orderly course of the heavenly bodies. Such was the religion of Canaan, Israel's neighbors, and, in a somewhat different way, Stoicism of the Graeco-Roman world. In religions of nature there is no need to look back into the past; the cycle of nature is always present and eternally available to those who look to nature.

There are religions of contemplation which seek god from within. Most forms of mysticism fall into this category, as does Buddhism. In Buddhism Guatama serves as an example of the contemplative life, but it is not really necessary to look back historically to him. The important thing is to look within, since within every man is the possibility of divine insight.

There are religions of morality which see the disclosure of God in the department of man to man. The Liberal Theology of the 19th century tended to fall into this category.¹⁴ The criterion for right action becomes reason or common sense or intuition. But these are in every man, and there is no intrinsic reason to look back to the past, except for examples. If Liberal Theology looked back to Jesus, it did so only to see an example for right action.¹⁵

Religions of nature, contemplation, or morality do not require looking back to the past. For each the criterion of truth is in the present—be it nature, contemplation, or reason. But a religion of history must look back, since a religion of history is founded on events of the past. And the criterion for religious truth must be in that past event.

¹³See, *inter al.*, R. Bainton. "The Bible and the Reformation," in *Five Essays on the Bible* (1960), pp. 21f.

¹⁴E.g., A. Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1900; ET, *What is Christianity?*). Leo Baeck's reply to Harnack, *Das Wesen des Judentums* (1922), tends to be in agreement on this point, although for Baeck creation as the act of God is the pre-condition for man's department to man.

¹⁵Thus Theodore Parker, the 19th century Unitarian, argued that "if it could be proved . . . that Jesus of Nazareth had never lived, still Christianity would stand firm . . .", quoted by J. L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought* (1946), Vol. 2, p. 285.

That Christianity was from its beginning a historical religion needs not be argued in detail, since this has become clear in most all of NT research.¹⁶ The earliest Christian literature extant, the letters of Paul, testify to this understanding of Christianity. The content of the *euaggelion* given in 1 Cor 15:3ff. is the death and—on the third day—the resurrection of the Messiah. For Paul these are particular events, tied to history. Even the appearances of the risen Lord are time-limited—Paul is the last in the succession of appearances (1 Cor 15:8). The historical character of this *euaggelion* is further indicated by the fact that both the death and resurrection are described as “in accordance with the scriptures,” a phrase which means that these events are recognized in the pattern of promise and fulfillment. This *euaggelion* is the basis of salvation (1 Cor 15:2). It is apparently older than Paul (note his introduction: he had “received” this *euaggelion*), and it is in common with the *euaggelion* preached by others (1 Cor 15:11). This text alone suggests that Christianity was based on an event in history which was understood to have saving effects. The event itself shared the characteristics of all historical events, *viz.*, limitation of time and space. But the message about the event, *i.e.*, the *euaggelion*, was proclaimed to others who were not themselves witnesses to the event. But all who would be saved (*e. g.*, those in Corinth) must look back to this event through the *euaggelion*. The event itself was not repeatable, but the message was.

Even if one speaks of Paul’s theology as “Christ Mysticism,” as did A. Schweitzer,¹⁷ this “mysticism” is not to be understood as referring to that “mysticism” which is characteristic of “religions of mysticism.” As Schweitzer himself argues, the mystical body of Christ (being in Christ) must be understood eschatologically (and therefore historically) as the community of the Elect beginning (in time) with the resurrection of the Messiah. The Christ event in history is normative for all those who are in Christ. It is true that the risen Christ is not limited by history and that he is ever present for those who are in Christ. And yet this Exalted One who is not now limited by historical characteristics is, nevertheless, the one who died and was raised; he is identified as the historical Jesus of Nazareth. A case in point for Paul is the Lord’s Supper. Christ is ever present in the Supper (I Cor 10:16ff.), but this Supper itself has its own history, going back to “the night when he was betrayed” (I Cor. 11:23).

What is true for the Pauline literature is true also for other early Christian literature. The transmission of sayings of and narratives about Jesus — and their incorporation into written “Gospels” — points at least to a continuing concern to look back to the founder and the foundation events. The Gospel according to John is explicit on this point. Jesus says that he will send the paraclete and “he will

¹⁶*E.g.*, O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (rev. edn., 1964).

¹⁷A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (ET, 1931).

teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). The key word here is "remembrance," a term which naturally suggests a looking back.¹⁸

The historically unique character of the salvation event is sometimes explicitly expressed by the terms *ephapax* and *hapax*. "The death he died he died to sin, once for all (*ephapax*)" (Rom 6:10). The Hebrew writer also accents the *ephapax* character of Christianity; Christ's offering was *ephapax* (Heb 7:27, 9:27; 10:10) and *hapax* (Heb 9:26, 28). So also for Peter the death of Christ was *hapax* (1 Pet 3:18), and for Jude the faith delivered was delivered *hapax* (Jude 3).

It should be noted that one of the first significant heresies confronted by the early church was a history-denying heresy, Gnosticism. Generally the Gnostics held a docetic view of Christ, denying that God had revealed himself in any real, historical event—such as the death of Jesus. Although early Christianity displayed a certain variety in describing Christ and his work, it strongly opposed all efforts to de-historicize the salvation event. The strong mood of opposition is seen already in the Johannine literature (1 John 2:22; 4:2; 2 John 7; and the Gospel according to John generally¹⁹). In opposition to gnostic tendencies the historical character of the *euaggelion* becomes accented even more—as in Ignatius (Ad Smyr. 1:1, 2). By the time of the Old Roman Creed (mid 2nd century?) the historical character is highlighted by the confession that the salvation event occurred "under Pontius Pilate."

These observations lead us to the conclusion that the very nature of Christianity involves a looking back to the decisive and definitive event wherein God revealed himself.

But this approach does not yet result precisely in the Restoration Principle and its motto "Back to the Bible." The most that can be said thus far is that the nature of Christianity demands looking back to the revelatory event. Of course, we cannot look back to that event apart from the sources. But what are the sources? From a purely historical point of view, no arbitrary limit can be set beforehand. There are 27 writings known to us as the New Testament, but there are other possible sources as well. The oral tradition of the early church continued past the time of the writing of the 27 documents of the NT collection, and various sayings of and narratives about Jesus appear in various literature of the first and second centuries. Attempts have been made to assess the historical and theolog-

¹⁸*Mnemoneuo* (to remember) was used in citing Jesus material in the early church, and Justin Martyr's source for Jesus material is called "Memoirs" (*apomnemoneumata*), cf. Justin, *Apol.* I 67.

¹⁹J. A. T. Robinson suggests that the author of the Fourth Gospel "is the New Testament writer who, theologically speaking, takes history more seriously than any other," in "The New Look on the Fourth Gospel," in *Twelve New Testament Studies* (1962), p. 102.

ical value of these so-called Agrapha,²⁰ and one of the latest attempts by J. Jeremias has resulted in the claim that 21 agrapha "are perfectly compatible with the genuine teaching of our Lord, and . . . have a claim to authenticity as the sayings recorded in our four Gospels."²¹ Although H. Köster is not concerned to establish authenticity as such, he has recently argued that certain traditional material appearing in the Apostolic Fathers represents a stage of gospel material as early or earlier than parallel material in the four Gospels.²² The discovery of the Nag Hammadi gospel material has opened the possibility of still additional agrapha or gospel material in a form earlier than that in the four gospels.²³ And who knows what other documents may yet be discovered—perhaps even one of those "narratives" referred to by the author of Luke-Acts (Lk 1:1)?²⁴

The historian follows the motto "Back to the sources," but this is not necessarily the same as the motto "Back to the Bible." The crucial word is the term "Bible." The nature of Christianity suggests that it is necessary, not only for the historian, but also for the theologian to look "Back . . ." But this approach in itself does not yet validate the exclusive object, "Bible."

The Problem of Canon

If the Restoration Principle, expressed in the motto "Back to the Bible" is to be defended, it is necessary to establish some basis for the exclusive use of the term "Bible." In effect this means that we must consider the problem of canon.

O. Cullmann has approached this subject in such a way as to bring together both the historical data on canon and a theological understanding of the nature of Christianity as a religion of history.²⁵ Cullmann notes that the primary factor involved in the recognition of the canon was apostolicity, and that the office of the apostle was

²⁰J. H. Ropes, *Die Sprueche Jesu, die in den kanonischen Evangelien nicht überliefert sind* (TU 14, 1896); A. Resch, *Agrapha: Ausserkanonische Schriftfragmente gesammelt und untersucht* (TU 15, 2nd edn., 1906); Ropes, "Agrapha", in *A Dictionary of the Bible* (Hastings), Vol. 5 (1906), 343-352.

²¹J. Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus* (ET, 1957), p. 30.

²²H. Köster, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den apostolischen Vätern* (1957).

²³The position taken by B. Gehardsson, *Memory and Manuscript* (1961), can be used to argue for a high degree of accuracy in the transmission of oral material as it comes to be incorporated in the four Gospels; but it can also be used to argue that this accuracy applies also to later use of the same oral tradition.

²⁴J. H. Roberts' novel, *The Q Document* (1964), is pure—and perhaps poor—fiction. Nevertheless, the hypothetical situation produced by the discovery of the Q document is provocative. What would happen if Q were discovered?

²⁵O. Cullmann, "The Tradition," in *The Early Church* (1956), pp. 57-99. This essay was written originally in dialogue with Roman Catholics who held that later tradition is also a fount of authority—in addition to the canon.

unique and limited to that generation immediately following Jesus.²⁶ He then argues:

... if one thinks through this important idea of the uniqueness of the apostolate, one necessarily gets to the point of making an essential difference . . . between the *foundation of the Church*, which took place in the period of the apostles, and the *post-apostolic Church*, which is no longer that of the apostles but of the bishops.²⁷

Cullmann argues that this distinction is fundamental in understanding the church's recognition of the canon, that is, her movement to delineate that which was apostolic—and, therefore, fundamental and unique. He goes further to conclude that all this leads naturally to what he calls "The scientific motto—back to the sources."²⁸ As a theologian Cullmann means nothing else than the motto "Back to the Bible."²⁹

Although this position fits well with the approach taken in this article, arguing as it does from the nature of Christianity, it presents certain problems to the traditional theology of the Restoration Movement. Cullmann wishes to distinguish between the apostolic material (*i.e.*, canon) and other tradition, but he can not argue his case apart from admitting that it was the church—including the sub-apostolic church—which, in fact, recognized the canon and its limits.³⁰ This appeal to the on-going church runs counter to the traditional Restoration Movement notions that (a) nothing significant for us happened after the death of the last apostle and (b) that the canon is self-authenticating.

Both of these notions ought to be subjected to critical examination. The argument that sacred history ended with the last of the apostles has generally rested on those proof texts which deal with the "falling away." But, as suggested above, none of these texts prove the point—except by eisegesis. They do not speak of a whole-

²⁶See also Cullmann's argument on the office of the apostle in *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* (ET, 1953), pp. 56ff. and *passim*.

²⁷"The Tradition," *op. cit.*, p. 79.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 82.

²⁹A similar position is now taken by certain Roman Catholic theologians, such as G. Baum, who has spoken of a "return to the Word of God" by which "we can distinguish within the life of the Church the elements which are of divine origin and those which represent purely human and hence conditional developments." See "Theological Reflections on the Second Vatican Council," in *Ecumenical Dialogue at Harvard* (1964), p. 80.

³⁰R. M. Grant puts it sharply: "The Church could have proclaimed, and in fact did proclaim, the gospel without possessing the New Testament; but the New Testament could not have come into existence apart from the Church." *A Historical Introduction to the New Testament* (1963), p. 25. K. Stendahl puts it somewhat differently: "To be sure, the church 'chose' its canon. But it did so under the impact of the acts of God by which it itself came into existence. The process of canonization is one of recognition, not one of creation *ex nihilo* or *ex theologia*," "Biblical Theology," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 429.

sale "falling away." And even if they did, they do not provide the data for dating or identifying such a "falling away" as coming after John the apostle but before Ignatius.³¹

Of greater importance is the notion that the canon is self-authenticating. The question under discussion here is not whether or not the 27 writings of the NT authenticate themselves to a reader—that is, whether or not these writings present themselves in a compelling way and thereby appear to the reader as "Word of God." Rather, the question is whether or not these writings only—and not others—so authenticate themselves. Is it automatically obvious that the Gospel of Matthew is canonical but that the Gospel of Peter or the Gospel to the Hebrews or the Gospel of Truth is not? Is it automatically obvious that the letters of Paul are canonical but that 1 Clement or the letters of Ignatius are not? Is it automatically obvious that the Revelation to John is canonical but that the Revelation to Peter or the Shepherd of Hermas is not? Is it automatically obvious that the letter of James is canonical but that the Didache is not? By using the term "automatically," I mean that the canonicity or non-canonicity inheres in the writing, apart from any historical considerations relating to the history of the early church.

The arguments for self-authenticity of the canon involve various kinds of problems. First of all, if self-authenticity of the canon is argued on a purely intuitional basis, it must be assumed that everyone's intuition will operate in exactly the same way; otherwise the term "canon" (or "Bible") would have little meaning, apart from a purely individualistic context. Actually, this approach would be difficult to test accurately. We would need to find 100 or more persons who had never read any Christian literature and who were not prejudiced by existing Christian practice, present them with copies of James and the Didache, and test whether or not all of them would choose James as canonical, instead of the Didache. Since the name of Jesus is mentioned more often in the Didache, one might guess that the Didache might be chosen instead of James.

It is also difficult to establish a self-authenticating canon on the basis of the content and intention of the documents themselves. It has been argued, "But the N. T. is different from any other writing which is so transmitted to us. It is different since, although directed to the people of the first century, it is also directed to people of all times."³² But is this self-evident? For instance, in the case of the Pauline literature we have letters addressed specifically to particular churches and individuals. The assumption that they are "directed to people of all time" is not self-evident from the content of these let-

³¹What happens to 1 Clement, which is contemporary with the Johannine literature, or the Didache, which may be earlier?

³²A. J. Malherbe, "An Introduction: The Task and Method of Exegesis," *RQ* 5 (1961), 169.

ters.³³ In the case of the Revelation to John we have a somewhat different situation. Although Rev. 1:4 indicates the addressees to be the seven churches in Asia, there are internal evidences that it was directed to a wider audience—perhaps to “people of all times” (cf. Rev 1:3; 22:18; etc.). But the same can be said for other early Christian apocalypses. The Revelation to Peter purports to be for people of all time—except for foolish men.³⁴ And the Shepherd of Hermas is clearly directed to people of all time (e.g., Sim. 10:4).

The line dividing early Christian literature which explicitly purports to be written for people of all time and that which is not so directed simply does not coincide with the line which divides the NT canon from non-canonical literature.

Another attempt to establish a self-authenticating canon has been made on the basis of inspiration, but this attempt involves a number of difficulties. First of all, it must be remembered that a fundamental tenet of early Christianity is that all Christians have received the Spirit. For Paul the Spirit is the eschatological gift, the down payment of the future inheritance (2 Cor 5:5; Eph 1:13f.). There is no indication that the Spirit was to be withdrawn at some point prior to the *parousia*; in fact, Acts 2:39 states that it is a gift to be available “to all that are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” With this in mind, it must then be asked whether or not the authors of the NT were endowed with an inspiration which differed from the inspiration of every Christian.³⁵ This question must not be confused with the question of whether or not there was a difference of authority between an apostle and the average Christian. The authority of an apostle might or might not involve a special inspiration, but that is just the question. Is there evidence within the NT which indicates this special inspiration for apostles? The most fruitful text for an affirmative answer would be John 14:26.³⁶

³³This assumption was not self-evident to the author of the Muratorian canon-list either. In this ca. 200 A.D. document the wider audience for these specific letters of Paul is defended by an ingenious piece of rationalization. See K. Stendahl, “The Apocalypse of John and the Epistles of Paul in the Muratorian Fragment,” in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (1962), pp. 239-245.

³⁴This limitation is characteristic also of Jewish apocalypses which are intended for the Elect people, not for the non-elect. For the text of Rev. Pet. see M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (1953), pp. 504-521, esp. pp. 518ff.

³⁵Analogies from the OT or from Judaism do not exactly apply, since the basic understanding of the Spirit differs from that in Christianity. The coming of the Spirit in the OT was sporadic and temporary. But the prophet Joel looked for the wholesale coming of the Spirit; the church believed this had happened.

³⁶In other NT writings this distinction is difficult to find. In the Book of Acts an apostle, Peter, is described as being “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 4:8), but the same description is given to non-apostles, such as Stephen (Acts 6:5; cf. 6:10). The author of Lk-Acts provides both volumes with an introduction, but he makes no explicit claim to a special inspiration.

Even so, this text does not answer all questions, especially as they relate to canon. If the apostles were endowed with special inspiration (which in turn was the basis of canon), did this special inspiration apply at all times and to all of their writings? If, for instance, a copy of Paul's "previous letter" to Corinth (*cf.* 1 Cor 5:9) were now discovered, would it be canon?³⁷ Those who attempt to make canon a direct function of inspiring, or *vice versa*, should examine the documents. Out of all early Christian literature surviving, which documents claim for the document itself inspiration? Which claims to be "Scripture"? When 2 Tim 3:16 is made to apply to the NT as well as to the OT—and then it is argued that all of the NT is "inspired," the question is begged. How do you know that each of the 27 writings is supposed to be called "Scripture"?³⁸

Furthermore, the fact remains that inspiration as such was not used by the early church as a decisive criterion in recognizing the limits of the canon. K. Stendahl has observed:

While "inspiration" is the self-evident presupposition for the process of canonization, we find nowhere a case where "inspiration" is used in a divisive, discriminating standard, a standard by which certain writings—doctrinally sound—are considered to be lacking "inspiration."³⁹

Only heretical writings were declared to be uninspired. The inspired nature of otherwise orthodox writings was not called into question—*e.g.*, the Shepherd of Hermas, which claims to be a revelation of the Spirit (*e.g.*, Vis I:1). Stendahl goes on to argue, "Inspiration, to be sure, is the divine presupposition for the New Testament, but the twenty-seven books were never chosen because they, and only they, were recognized as inspired."⁴⁰ To put it simply, writings which were scriptural (canonical) were understood to be inspired; but writings which were unscriptural (non-canonical) were not necessarily uninspired.

In the final analysis it is difficult to avoid a historical approach

³⁷In view of recently discovered documents such as the Gospel of Truth (previously known only by reference), such a suggestion need not be considered altogether fanciful, even if it remains highly improbable.

³⁸R. D. Preuss betrays the weakness of this (his own) position. He notes: "It has been said that we have gone beyond the facts when we call Scripture a revelation; nowhere does the Bible explicitly claim to be a revelation from God." But the only answer which Preuss gives for this objection is that "historic Christianity" has always called these writings "revelation." In other words, he does not justify his position on internal evidence from the Bible, but on the external evidence. "The Nature of the Bible," in C. F. H. Henry (ed.), *Christian Faith and Modern Theology* (1964), p. 127.

³⁹"The Apocalypse of John and the Epistles of Paul in the Muratorian Fragment," *op. cit.*, p. 243.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 245. G. Bardy has argued that there was a constant patristic belief to the effect that the Fathers were inspired, "L'inspiration des Pères de l'Eglise," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 40 (1951/52), 7-26.

to the problem of canon. But this would mean that the activity of the early church in the second to fourth centuries must be taken seriously. This does not mean that everything said or done by this sub-apostolic church is normative for today. In fact, it means just the opposite. In recognizing a canon of scripture the sub-apostolic church distinguished herself from the apostolic church. Thereby she distinguished between the authority of the apostles and subsequent church leaders. She submitted herself to a certain corpus of literature which she recognized as unique. Nevertheless, it remains a historical fact that we call a certain 27 writings "Bible" because the sub-apostolic church called them "Bible." The validity of the motto "Back to the Bible" rests in part on this canonization activity.

It may be added that the possibility for going "Back to the Bible" also depends on the church of subsequent centuries. Because the church recognized these 27 writings as "Bible," they were preserved, copied, transmitted and translated for the present day. So long as the church recognized these writings as canons, she recognized—at least implicitly, a difference between the *ephapax* character of the apostolic church and the on-going church of subsequent times.

Of course, it may also be argued that the subsequent on-going church did not rightly understand her own canon and/or that she did not take it seriously. It is to the credit of Alexander Campbell and other early Restorationists of the 19th century that they endeavored to do both—to understand rightly the text of the canon and to take it seriously.

Two Additional Concerns

If there is validity to the Restoration Principle expressed in the motto "Back to the Bible," then there are two other important questions which must be noted—although neither can be discussed fully in this article. First, if we are to go "Back to the Bible," then presumably it is important to ask what the text meant. In other words, the Restoration Principle necessarily involves the science of exegesis. A. Campbell held that

The words and sentences of the Bible are to be translated, interpreted and understood according to the same code of laws and principles of interpretation by which other ancient writings are translated and understood.⁴¹

Campbell's words written in the 19th century sound strikingly modern. But the *results* of 19th century exegesis have in some cases been superceded in the present time *because* "principles of interpretation" have been more greatly refined and *because* new data has become available.⁴² What is to be done, if anything, when contemporary exegesis results in an understanding of a NT text in variance with

⁴¹"Alexander Campbell on Interpreting the Bible," *RQ* 5 (1961), 248-250.

⁴²I am ruling out those "results" based primarily on ill-conceived theological or philosophical prejudices—which are acceptable neither in Campbell's view nor in the view of the majority of modern Biblical scholars.

traditional, 19th century Restoration interpretation? The problem is far more acute for Restoration Theology than it is for traditional Protestant Conservatives or Fundamentalists. The latter can always—and often do—fall back on the traditional exegesis of Augustine, Luther, Calvin *et al.* In principle, this approach is not open to Restorationists who are committed to go “Back to the Bible” without going through Calvin, Luther and Augustine. Independent exegesis is the aim of modern Biblical studies, but it would seem that this aim also inheres in the Restoration Principle.

The more difficult problem is that of hermeneutics. How is the exegeted text to be applied to the contemporary situation? The traditional Restoration hermeneutic involves a logical system of “commands, approved examples and necessary inferences.”⁴³ This approach ought to be subjected to critical analysis. These categories are not set forth as a hermeneutic within the text of the NT, but rather they are derived from a certain logical system imposed from outside the text. The question should be raised as to whether or not this logical system is consonant with the nature of the NT itself. And the presuppositions of this hermeneutic should be discovered and clarified.

The Restoration Principle is meaningless unless the hermeneutical problem is carefully considered. A careful consideration of this problem is not possible here, but a suggestion can be offered. One might attempt to “restore NT Christianity” by attempting to understand NT theology and then apply this theological insight to the present situation. This approach is not to be confused with a simplistic proof text method or artificial constructions of patterns (where they do not appear explicitly in the NT). It would involve an inside understanding of the life, thought, and practices of the apostolic churches. It would involve, if possible, finding the central and motivating forces of those churches and restoring these to the present church. This approach differs from A. C. DeGroot’s approach insofar as it would recognize also the importance of rites and institutions reflected in the canon of scripture.⁴⁴ If this approach defends believer’s baptism, it would do so not simply because some text commands it (To whom is it commanded?), but because only believer’s baptism is consonant with the general theological understanding of the apostolic churches. If this approach defends weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper, it would not do so on the single example of Acts 20:7,⁴⁵ but because the theological understanding of the Lord’s

⁴³See e.g., J. D. Thomas, *We Be Brethren*.

⁴⁴See my criticisms of DeGroot in “Is the Restoration Principle Valid?” *op. cit.*, pp. 57-60.

⁴⁵The proof text argument here is extremely weak. Certainly the church at Troas broke bread on the first day of the week, as indicated by the context. But does this prove that the same practice existed elsewhere, e.g., in Corinth? Note A. J. Malherbe’s argument that I Cor 16:2 does not refer to a corporate worship context, “The Corinthian Contribution,” *RQ* 3 (1959), 223.

Supper demands frequent observance—perhaps as often as the church assembles.

This approach would mean that one would go "Back to the Bible," not only to reform abuses and errors, but also for creative insight, springing from the foundation of the church.

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