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Reclaiming A Heritage

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Reclaiming a Heritage
RICHARD T. HUGHES

K. C. Moser and Churches of Christ: A Historical Perspective
JOHN MARK HICKS

Inerrancy, Inspiration, and Dictation
JOEL STEPHEN WILLIAMS

Dispensing Tokens: A Practice Long Gone?
W. A. SUCH

Book Reviews

Book Notes

Books Received
It is by now a commonplace that Churches of Christ are suffering a severe identity crisis. In part, our crisis is also the crisis of American civilization, a crisis rooted in the widespread skepticism of the Enlightenment foundations of our culture. One might therefore ask how a nation or a church, founded on modern principles, can survive in a postmodern age.

The identity crisis of Churches of Christ, however, has even more to do with the particular history of our tradition. Standing at the heart of that crisis is the restoration vision, a vision that was central to the agenda of Churches of Christ until very recent years.

For a very long time, that vision was thoroughly linked to polity concerns, patternism, legalism, and even exclusivism. The questions we brought to the restoration vision were questions of form and method: What is the proper form of church organization? What are the proper forms for worship? What is the proper form of baptism? For celebrating the Lord’s supper? For singing? Even now, in the late twentieth century, many in our churches still think of the Christian faith in those terms which, for them, constitute genuine restorationism.

On the other hand, it is time to admit that in our churches, a wide variety of people from all walks of life—homemakers, businesspeople, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and day laborers—simply do not find patternism and legalism to be meaningful themes. Nonetheless, we have associated those themes with the restoration vision for so long that we hardly know how to conceptualize that vision in any other way. And so we throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. For many in our churches today, the restoration vision is a dead-end street, an essentially useless category. And so we are left with no usable past, no clear identity, and no meaningful legacy. Essentially, we are spiritual orphans. We are left, therefore, to start again, to rethink the Christian faith from scratch. In a sense, rethinking the faith from scratch is in sync with the restoration vision. The problem is that

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1 This material was presented at the annual Restoration Quarterly breakfast held in connection with the 1994 American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Chicago, November 21, 1994.
we have largely abandoned the vision that would sustain us in that effort. Inevitably, therefore, we rethink the faith in someone else’s terms, as if we have no meaningful story to tell. And that is the crux of the identity crisis that engulfs Churches of Christ today.

I am fully aware of the illusions the restoration vision can foster. Nonetheless, we need to ask, is there another way to understand the restoration vision, a way that might redeem that vision for this generation but that, at the same time, would connect in meaningful and powerful ways with the history and heritage of Churches of Christ? To answer that question, I want to explore some neglected aspects of our own history.

The Anabaptist/Mennonite Heritage

Before I do that, however, I want to turn to another tradition that was profoundly restorationist, yet that defined the restoration vision in ways radically different from its definition in our fellowship, at least in the twentieth century. That tradition is sixteenth-century Anabaptism and its modern heir, the Mennonites.

In his pioneering book *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, Franklin Littell explained that Anabaptism was fundamentally a restorationist movement. Anabaptists, however, seldom spoke of polity issues. They seldom asked about form and method. Instead, they focused the restoration lens squarely on questions of lifestyle—what contemporary Mennonites refer to as radical discipleship. For almost five hundred years Mennonites have concluded that radical discipleship is a countercultural commitment. They have refused to fight, they have nurtured humility, they have served the poor and the dispossessed, and they have abandoned themselves for the sake of others. They have done all this for one reason: they sought to conform themselves to the pattern of the cross and to the teachings and example of Jesus.

A case in point is the story of a Dutchman named Dirk Willems. In 1569 the court issued a warrant for Willems’ arrest, but when the sheriff

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4 Harold S. Bender defined this “Anabaptist Vision” in his presidential address to the American Society of Church History in 1943. Enormously influential in Mennonite circles, that address helped shape the way many contemporary Mennonites understand their forebears and themselves. Bender elaborated on that vision in his book *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1957).
and his deputy came to seize him, he fled. According to the great Anabaptist chronicle, the *Martyrs' Mirror*, it was the dead of winter, and Willems ran quickly across the frozen river, only to hear the deputy fall through the ice behind him. Willems knew full well that the deputy could not survive in the freezing waters. He also knew that the deputy could not escape the water's icy grip alone. But he also knew that, if he returned to aid the deputy, he himself would be apprehended and likely killed. Willems, however, turned back and pulled the man to safety. When the sheriff arrived only minutes later, the deputy argued strongly that Willems should be spared. But the sheriff commanded that he be seized. Only days later, he was burned at the stake. This was the meaning of the restoration vision for sixteenth-century Anabaptists.

To this day, the restoration vision plays a meaningful role in the belief structure of many Mennonites, the heirs of the Anabaptists. For example, just this year, a young coed at Notre Dame asked one of her teachers, Gerald Schlabach, about his faith. Schlabach, a graduate teaching assistant and a Mennonite, replied, Deep in our community . . . lies an instinct to . . . return to basic New Testament Christianity. I am not so sure as some Mennonites that this is ever possible, but if I have to choose, I'll certainly prefer the attempt to approximate New Testament Christianity over any later version. And what might this vision mean to Mennonites today? John Roth, a young history professor at Goshen College, insists that "radical discipleship" lies at the heart of that vision:

Radical discipleship should continue to name the principalities and powers of the world, to denounce the political and economic injustices of our society, but it should also include many small and more humble acts of cultural defiance and transformation. [It might] mean staying married to one person for life. It might mean a sacrificial and personal commitment to children and the elderly—the most vulnerable in our society—putting their interests above our rights, even if it is inconvenient. . . . It might mean forgoing the quickest routes to vocational success by setting aside a portion of life for focused service. . . . None of these . . . [are] great, heroic deeds of self-renunciation, but . . . [rather,] natural expression[s] of . . .

6 Letter from Gerald Schlabach to student, University of Notre Dame, fall, 1994.
the living presence of God woven into the very fabric of our daily lives.7

Against this backdrop of the Anabaptist/Mennonite understanding of the restoration vision, one can begin to understand why a variety of contemporary Mennonite scholars have severely criticized the restoration vision of the Churches of Christ. John Howard Yoder, for example, wrote years ago that our “narrowing of the restitution focus to formal polity issues may have contributed to discrediting the idea of restitution.”8

As Franklin Littell explains, however, the problem was larger than that. Though formally a Methodist, Littell is Anabaptist to the core. We should not be surprised, therefore, to hear his claim that Churches of Christ embraced the rhetoric of restorationism, but seldom embraced its substance. In Littell’s reading of our history, which was largely confined to his reading of Alexander Campbell, there was little sense of separation from the world, little or no engagement with countercultural Christianity, and little appreciation for any sort of radical Christian lifestyle. Instead, under Campbell’s leadership, our movement conformed itself to the pattern of our culture, not to the pattern of the cross. Indeed, Littell argues, many in our movement confused the glories of the ancient church with the glories of the nation. “The sometime millennial goal,” he wrote, “of a separated pilgrim people passing through to another age and another City was overpowered by the manifest blessings and vital appeal of America.” But for Littell, there was even more. He writes:

As an out-grouper, it seems to me that the bone that stuck in the throat, methodologically, was the insistence that the religious program qualify by the norms set by Scottish Common Sense philosophy. The secure ground of a powerful myth or root metaphor was left behind, and vigorous minds entered into the intellectual controversies of the age as modernity defined them. To “stick to the facts,” to proclaim Bible “facts,” to authenticate religious truth by grafting it onto “the scientific method”—these are rules more readily related to vital civil life in nineteenth century America than they are to what could be known and reclaimed from the life of early Christians at Corinth and Antioch and Ephesus. The stance of primitivism, which looks backward for its norms, was replaced by the spirit


of modernity, looking blithely toward a future of progressive and orderly change.⁹

If Littell is correct, the identity crisis that Churches of Christ experience today is nothing new. Instead, it was built into the movement from its outset. The crisis lay in the fact that we employed the language of restoration and, by implication, of countercultural Christianity, but failed to actualize that vision. Instead, we settled for second best. We spoke of forms and methods instead of discipleship. We looked for “Bible facts” instead of models for holy living. And we focused on the Acts of the Apostles instead of on Jesus, the cross, and the Sermon on the Mount. And in the context of the book of Acts, we focused on Acts as facts instead of Acts as story. It was inevitable that, in time, the rhetoric of restoration would ring hollow in our ears.

This is not to suggest that all forms and structures are irrelevant or unimportant. To the contrary, some forms and structures are important to the extent that they symbolize the gospel message in powerful ways. For example, baptism by immersion is fundamental, not only because it symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, but also because it symbolizes a “new birth” for the believer. In this way, baptism points unwaveringly to the kingdom of God which Jesus brought into the world, which he makes alive in us today, and which he will extend over all the earth when his rule is complete. But it is difficult to see much connection between the kingdom of God and many of the concerns which we have placed on the center of the Christian stage.

The Other Side of the Story

Yet there is another side to the story of Churches of Christ, a side that is little known and seldom told. This is the story that centers on Barton W. Stone, who taught Churches of Christ an entirely different understanding of the restoration vision. Stone concerned himself not so much with the forms and structures of the early church as with what it meant to live out one’s life as a disciple in the kingdom of God. And like the Mennonites, Stone understood discipleship in radical, countercultural ways. He therefore abandoned his ambitions for a lucrative legal career and gave his life to preaching—a commitment that brought him hardship and poverty for the rest of his days. But there are other notable measures of Stone’s countercultural orientation. First, Joseph Thomas tells us that the Kentucky Christians who followed Stone freed their slaves long before such a course was popular or

even acceptable in the South. "I will observe that the christians of these parts," Thomas wrote, "abhorr the idea of slavery, and some of them have almost tho't that they who hold to slavery cannot be a christian." Further, Stone shared with Mennonites an uncompromising commitment to pacifism and non-violence.

Stone’s restoration vision, however, was not simply an appeal to the first Christian age. Instead, it was profoundly shaped by his apocalyptic orientation. In Timothy Weber’s memorable phrase, Stone lived “in the shadow of the second coming.” This meant that for Stone, the final rule of God was not remote and far away. Instead, it was present in the here and now. He therefore sought to live his life as if the final triumph of the kingdom of God were a reality in this present world. This perspective lent Stone’s faith a profoundly countercultural dimension.

There is no better illustration of Stone’s apocalyptic, countercultural perspective than his position on politics. His premise was simply this: The lawful King, Jesus Christ, will shortly put them [human governments] all down, and reign with his Saints on earth a thousand years, without a rival. ... Then shall all man made laws and governments be burnt up forever. These are the seat of the beast. ...

Following that premise, his conclusion was: “We must cease to support any other government on earth by our counsels, co-operation, and choice.” And so he refused even to vote, preferring instead to live his life under the singular rule of the kingdom of God.

It is not my intention to hold up Stone’s political orientation as a model for us today. Nor do I commend Stone’s tendency to separate himself from the world’s affairs. The Christian faith does not call us to isolate ourselves from the world, but to serve the world as salt, leaven, and light.

Nonetheless, there is much that we can learn from Barton W. Stone. In particular, I want to suggest that an apocalyptic orientation is vital to any serious restorationist perspective. Cut off from apocalyptic underpinnings, restorationism grows flat, wooden, and legalistic. Cut off from an apocalyptic orientation, we can imagine that God cares more about forms and structures and arbitrary rules than he does about how we treat other people in the name of Jesus Christ. And apart from apocalyptic understandings, our reading of the NT is inevitably colored more by the

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concerns of the culture in which we live than it is by God's own rule and kingdom.

Put in positive terms, an apocalyptic vision allows us to view both Scripture and the world from the perspective of God's final rule over all the earth. For that reason, an apocalyptic vision allows us to refocus our restorationist lens and prompts us to discover what is finally central in the biblical text. It therefore forces us to understand all of Scripture from the perspective of passages like this.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. (Matt. 25:31-36, NIV)

Further, when we view the biblical text through an apocalyptic lens, we quickly discover that the great themes that define the final triumph of the kingdom of God are the very same themes that defined the kingdom Jesus established two thousand years ago. Thus, when John's disciples asked Jesus if he was "the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else," Jesus replied,

Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. (Matt 11:2-5)

Or again, when Jesus entered the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, he took up the scroll and read from the book of Isaiah,

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Then Jesus explained, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:18-21)

Clearly, the kingdom of God appeared in the life and work of the Son of God and will appear again in all its fullness in the final age. This means that the restoration vision and the apocalyptic vision are really two sides of the same coin and point to the same reality, the kingdom of God. One who lives life in "the shadow of the Second Coming," therefore, lives
life in the shadow of the first as well. For these reasons, a genuine restorationist is not one who, having settled comfortably into the present world, then seeks to recover the forms and structures of an ancient church. Rather, a genuine restorationist is one who embraces the values of the kingdom of God. These are lessons we can learn from the restorationist and apocalyptic teachings of Barton W. Stone.

Stone’s vision exerted an enormous impact on many in Churches of Christ throughout the nineteenth century. David Lipscomb, the great third-generation leader of our movement, especially embraced this perspective. Lipscomb refused to identify the church with the kingdom of God. Instead, the kingdom of God was the rule of God that would fill the earth in the last days, and he gave to that kingdom his unbending allegiance. For this reason, although a man of some means, he identified with the outcast and the poor, resisted racial discrimination, refused to vote or to fight in wars, and worked tirelessly to relieve suffering and hurt in his own city of Nashville.

There can be no doubt that Lipscomb’s radical posture declined in popularity among Churches of Christ as the nineteenth century wore on. After all, many took their bearings more from Campbell than they did from Stone. Accordingly, these “Campbellites” defined the restoration vision more as a scientific re-creation of the forms and structures of ancient Christianity than as a re-creation of the countercultural communities identified with the kingdom of God. Yet, Lipscomb’s vision persisted with remarkable strength, especially in Middle Tennessee and the surrounding regions.

Then, between 1915 and 1960, Churches of Christ fought two great intramural wars. When those wars were over, we had essentially abandoned our posture as a restorationist sect and emerged more and more as a culture-shaped denomination. The first of those wars centered on premillennial eschatology which mainly served to symbolize a much deeper issue: the validity of the apocalyptic perspective, inherited from Stone and Lipscomb.

Churches of Christ had suffered in the late nineteenth century a disastrous division from the Disciples of Christ. In almost every city, the Disciples took the bulk of the members and the bulk of the wealth. Now relegated to the “wrong side of the tracks,” Churches of Christ were left virtually to begin again, especially in urban areas.

World War I erupted in 1914 and found Churches of Christ seeking to compensate for their diminished standing. Specifically, they sought numerical growth and respectability. But it would be exceedingly difficult for us to gain many members or much respect in the crusading climate of World War I. After all, many in our movement had committed themselves

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13 The story that follows is a summary of key themes from my history of Churches of Christ (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, forthcoming).
both to pacifism and to an apocalyptically outlook that judged the nation and found it wanting. Not surprisingly, leaders of Churches of Christ now took steps to scuttle the apocalyptic worldview.

This issue played itself out over dispensational premillennialism, which a small minority of Churches of Christ had embraced. The mainstream of our tradition, however, rejected the premillennial vision and literally purged the church of its premillennial sympathizers. By the time they had finished their work, the entire apocalyptic vision among Churches of Christ—including the pacifist tradition—was essentially dead.

The destruction of the apocalyptic vision severely weakened both the restoration vision and the countercultural dimensions of Churches of Christ who increasingly made their peace with the spirit of the age. For example, by the 1930s, significant segments of Churches of Christ joined the Protestant crusade for old-fashioned Americanism, anti-Communism, and the maintenance of a Christian America. All this paved the way for the second major fight of the century.

In the aftermath of World War II, Churches of Christ sought to enter the mainstream of American culture as a “respectable denomination,” though no one would have used that term. They did this through a variety of promotional strategies, through increasingly complex institutional structures, and through a vast building campaign, aimed at giving Churches of Christ more visibility in the affluent and “respectable” parts of town. Many who maintained their allegiance to the values of nineteenth-century Churches of Christ saw these developments as nothing less than betrayal of the restoration vision. A bitter fight ensued, and when the dust finally settled in the late 1950s, the mainstream of Churches of Christ had essentially purged from their ranks those they labeled the “antis”—shorthand for the “anti-institutional” Churches of Christ.

We emerged from the 1950s shell-shocked and battle-scarred. Our most immediate legacy was one of legalism, infighting, and ruptured congregations. We could hardly have been more poorly prepared to deal with the great moral and ethical issues that convulsed the nation in the 1960s. As a result, our churches, for the most part, either ignored those issues, thinking them irrelevant to the gospel message; or they implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—supported the racist and militarist structures that sparked the debates of those years. Not surprisingly, many of our brightest young people left Churches of Christ in that period. It is some comfort, at least, to realize that Stone, Lipscomb, and thousands of others who affirmed an apocalyptic/restorationist perspective in the nineteenth century would have addressed those same issues in very different ways. We know this because we know something of their record on similar kinds of concerns.
Conclusion

Since those years, Churches of Christ have sought to rebuild and recover some sort of meaningful identity. We have done this by focusing on the one theme that matters most in the Christian faith—the cross of Christ—and growing out of that theme, a newfound theology of grace. But we have not even begun to integrate our traditional restoration vision into this newly discovered biblical theology. The fact is that in many instances we could not integrate the two if we tried, and thus, to the extent that the restoration vision survives in our churches, our theology proceeds on two tracks that seem to have very little to do with each other.

We are faced, therefore, with several options. One is to abandon the restoration vision altogether. In my view, this option is singularly unhelpful since it cuts us off from our historic roots as a movement. It is rather like a divorce: it terminates the story that we, as a people, have been telling by virtue of our life together for a very long time.

The other option is to rethink and reaffirm our restoration heritage in ways more in keeping with the biblical witness—and more in keeping with our own particular history. But this would mean a radical shift for most of us in Churches of Christ. To affirm the restoration vision from a distinctly apocalyptic perspective, and to learn what it means to live life “between the times,” would require us, in turn, to affirm ourselves as a radical, cross-centered, and countercultural people. At the very least, we must find some way to connect our history—the story of our life together—to the cross, not just to facts and forms, method and structures.

There are two obstacles, however, that may block our path. In the first place, it may be that we are far too much at home with the world even to contemplate such a shift. In that light, the easiest path by far would be to continue our focus on forms, structures, and method. In the second place, we never have taken our own history seriously. Now, in more recent years, we may have so thoroughly abandoned the story of our common life together, along with its restoration vision, that we are beyond the point of return.

If either of these is true, then the handwriting is on the wall: the identity crisis that has plagued this movement for so long will not abate, but will only intensify until, finally, we tell a story that is not our own and our movement is virtually swallowed by one strain or another of the popular religious culture in which we live. That may be what a majority in Churches of Christ now want, but, if not, it is time to recognize the seriousness of the crisis that faces us today and to begin to ask what we can do to address it.