

## A Brief History, Ebb and Flow of this Movement Today and Where We are Going

By Dr. Keith J. Wise

**Introduction:** “Context is the backdrop of all historical and religious events” so said the American Historian Henry Steel Commager. To properly position my remarks today, I want to see if we can understand the environment of early 19<sup>th</sup> century America. It is important to cite this perspective as one discusses Cain Ridge, Kentucky and the context of the frontier of Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton. People were flooding into Kentucky and Ohio for land and opportunity. According to the U.S. Census Bureau records, the Kentucky population stood at 221,000 by 1800. However, the spiritual aspect of the frontier had become pathetic. Michael Hines notes one Colonial Historian that said, “By the turn of the century (1800) the first great awakening had become a great sleep.” (First Great Awakening is considered from 1734-1750) Why? The Age of Reason (1650-1815) All of this is translated on the frontier in drunkenness, permissive sexuality, gambling, and crime. Hines notes that it was not uncommon to meet men with but one eye, gouged out in a bar fight or skirmish. Into this foray we emerge with what historians call the Second Great Awakening. (1792-1860) It first swept the eastern seaboard then moved inland. Timothy Dwight at Yale University and Charles Finney were a product of this revival fervor.

But what was the catalyst that united the ideas of revival on the frontier and moved whole families to embrace such a movement. There was on the frontier some “shared spiritual values.”

1. The populations were a product of the Protestant Reformation- Well documented, the number one tenant was that the Bible was the sole authority in spiritual life. Even on the frontier families brought “family bibles” with them to read. Historically, the Bible was the first “text book” of the primitive public schools and the frontier was to be tamed for educating of the next generation.
2. Education increasingly became “king” on the frontier. If you look at the rise of educational institutions in Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Tennessee,

public “high education” became prominent in the middle to late 19<sup>th</sup> century. (see some of the Land Grant Universities foundings) Thus, Campbell and Bethany College and later schools of higher education in our movement. (You can make a list) A hunger to know what the Bible said apart from ties to the stagnant Church traditions of Europe became noted. In reality, the democratization of literacy and education accelerated a craving for learning Biblical truth, while rejecting in part the creeds, liturgies and faith statements of the old world. Again, an influence of the American Revolution and breaking with old traditions in an old world hovered over the American landscape.

Any number of individuals that come from a variety of religious backgrounds become obsessed in finding “the ancient order.” People like James O’Kelly (1784) and Rice Haggard, Methodist in North Carolina, believed in using the word “Christian” as the universal collective idea of the Church. Abner Jones, (1800) a prominent Baptist preacher in Vermont with the same ideas. Elias Smith a friend of Jones also established congregations and published papers to spread such ideas as an intense study of the New Testament and their willingness to follow it. (*The Herald of Gospel Liberty*) Barton W. Stone (1801) a Presbyterian and troubled by the teachings of Calvinism changed his approach by producing a document with several other Presbyterian ministers entitled “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery.” Thomas Campbell, was a brilliant educator having come from County Down, Ireland (1763). His conflict with the Presbyterian Synod over the frequency and individuals who were to receive the Lord’s Supper in western Pennsylvania became paramount. By August of 1809, he and several friends and adherents formed the “Christian Associate of Washington” and proceeded to draw up a statement of purpose which they called “The Declaration and Address.”

With the coming to America of Alexander Campbell, Thomas’ son, we find a conflict of personal interest in which as David Eubanks in his tract, *This We Believe* notes, “...It led to a soul-searching and Bible-Study rejection of infant sprinkling by Alexander Campbell on the occasion of the birth of his first child, followed by the immersion of Thomas and Alexander Campbell in obedience to our Lord’s command on June 12, 1812.” (pg. 3)

Without a long list of historical documentations, through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Eurbanks notes that we moved by 1909 to a people from 200,000 to 1,500,000. Some historians of the time said it was the largest and fastest growing documented movement in Church history.

Without a long and descriptive historical process, we can say in a confident manner that by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the growth and emphasis of the Restoration Movement can be summarized as follows:

- Recognition of Christ and the Apostles as supreme authority in all aspects of belief, and the New Testament as the only rule of faith and practice. (Tensions emerged between “Unity” “Biblical Examples.”)
- A proper distinction between the Old and New Covenants or Testaments.
- Recognition of the New Testament ideal pattern of the Church.
- The autonomy of the local church.
- The unity of all Christians under Christ as the ultimate authority.

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What I would like to do in this section is talk about emergent themes that have come to spell the movement. As I do this, I will refer to Michael Hines’ book, History of the American Restoration Movement-2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Pgs. 318-320

**Introduction:** In the mid 1990’s Ohio preachers gathered in Columbus, Ohio to discuss Restoration Movement values. Here are the ten principles that emerged entitled, Prescription 6: Cling to the Movement’s Values.

1. The Lordship of Christ- To follow Christ is to not only making his savior but also Lord. (Acts 2:36)
2. The scripture as God’s Word written (II Tim. 2:16-17) and is the believer’s sole authority in matters of faith and practice.
3. Human beings, though flawed, can read and understand the Bible for themselves. Commentaries, Bible lessons, and skilled teachers are all helpful, but they are all fallible human sources.
4. Believers may affirm differing views on matters of opinion- Knowledge is what is believed because of personal experience. Faith is what is accepted on the basis of testimony concerning the experience of others. Opinion is a belief stemming from neither experience nor testimony. Diversity of

opinion is granted where Scripture does not or speak or is open to interpretation.

5. The responsibility of each individual to hear and believe the Gospel- Faith does not result from the direct impact of the Holy Spirit. Faith comes from hearing the testimony of the Word of God. (Romans 10:17). While knowledge may be imperfect, it is sufficient for a person to know he is a sinner and in need of a Savior and that Jesus is God's provision for salvation.
6. The priesthood of all believers. Each Christian is a minister of God. There is no biblical basis for separation of believers into laity and clergy. There is no special call from God to a believer to set them apart as a special class of Christian. Servants of God are merely servants. Congregations should not depend on professionals to do God's work but should equip and commission every believer for service.
7. The local congregation is the only visible manifestation of Christ's Church. God incorporates all believers into his church. (Acts 2:47) Believers should unite with a local assembly where they may grow through instruction, sharing, service, and fellowship. There are no "Long Ranger" Christians. There is also no rationale in Scripture for any extra-congregational human institution or agency to have authority over the local church. While the universal church consists of all Christians everywhere, there is no biblical sense in which an organization or association of congregations should be considered "the church."
8. Evangelism is the church's primary mission. A healthy congregation wins others to Jesus, immerses them into Christ, and equips them for service so they in turn may share the Gospel with others.
9. Christ's desire is for the church to be united (John 17:20-23) Division is a horrid evil which hinders the fulfillment of the church's mission.
10. Whatever unites a believer to Christ unites them to all believers. Scripture reveals God unites a person to Christ by grace, through faith in Christ, in their baptism, for the purpose of doing God's work (Ephesians 2:8-10 and Galatians 3:27). Wherever God has a child, there is a brother or sister.

## AN AUTOPSY OF A DECEASED CHURCH

The local Church has been the hallmark of the Restoration Movement. Our “feeder system” of Christian Service Camps and Bible Colleges have historically been inspired by a loose co-operation of local churches in a geographical area. But what has happened to the local Church? Some of the statements above might produce some questions; have they been compromised by some self interest, strange teaching, or just high-jacking of buildings and interpretations of new relevancy? Let us do some work of analysis in a series of “Autopsies” of dying churches of our ilk in America.

None of us like to consider “Why Churches Die?” However, unless we do some analysis and self-examination, we will fall into what I call “Oblivianism.” There is rarely a unique reason in the modern sense that a church of the Restoration Plea dies or disappears. There are unfortunately, some redundancies that seem to characterize dying churches.

- I. Slow Erosion- It is rare for individuals who are long-term members of a local church, to see the erosion of what they interpret as “normalcy.” Growth may have happened rapidly in the memory of many, but decline is usually imperceptibly slow. This slow erosion is profound because the faithful and sacrificial members have no sense of urgency motivating them to change. (Frog in the Kettle Illust.) They tend to see the membership on a regular basis; they don’t see the gradual decline that is taking place before their eyes. An example of this is “generational change and viewpoint.” (Answer: Return to the foundations of scripture).
- II. Worshipping a Heroic Past- Many times in declining churches, memories of past revivals, ministers, elders, events or programs begin to be remembered with a reverence, almost at a point of worship. Normal changes in any living organism require healthy alteration for procreation and survival. With a stagnant mindset, any internal or external force which seeks to “change” some perceived revered reality, moves this collection of thinking from scriptural precedent such as the great

commission or the winning of souls to nothing. The confirmed proclamation of the old Jerusalem gospel becomes unfortunately dated and ignored. Many times, people with this perspective will respond with anger and resolution and say: “We will die before we change our mind child or tradition.” And they do, and they did!!

My observation here is that the old evil of selfishness and jealousy move in. Churches like this, only focus on their own needs instead of others. They look “inwardly” instead of “outwardly.” For them the most comfortable approach satisfies them.

- III. The Local Church Refuses to Look Like the Community- Usually, dying churches are concerned with self-preservation. They refuse to see who is in their neighborhood. I know of a congregation in the Mid-West where all the members except two, drive from ten to twenty miles each Lord’s Day because their parents or grand-parents had attended at that location. The ethnic population had changed, and they were an island in the middle of the sea of cultural modification. Somehow, there had been a decision made to not seek reaching and caring for the community that the Lord had now placed around them to evangelize.
- IV. The Budget Moved Inwardly- In the experience that is usually presented, a financial pattern developed over time: funds were used more to keeping the machinery of the church moving and to keep the members happy, rather than to the funding of the Great Commission.
- V. The Great Commission became the Great Omission- As I have looked over this issue in at least three states, I saw a common pattern. Obedience to the Great Commission faded; it usually faded gradually. It’s not like one day the church was sending out dozens of missionaries and it suddenly stopped. Instead, the decline in the outward focus was gradual, almost imperceptible gradual. If I read the New Testament correctly, we are to be servants and obedient. The ideals of self-sacrifice are commended in the New Testament. On the other hand, in dying churches an encroachment of self-worship, self-serving, self-giving, and

self-entitlement seems to raise its ugly head. Its all about me, myself and I. Fear that paralyzed, rather than Faith that energized became the norm.

- VI. Preacher(Evangelist) Tenure Decreases- A church that is growing, tends to have men in the pulpit that have longer ministries than five years. In fact, all the statics show that in our broad culture, people have more difficulty bonding now than in the past. (the electronic devices) Therefore, it takes a new minister up to five years to learn all the names of its membership of members over a hundred people. Short term ministries, sometime of the ministers own doing, must be noted as a factor in our calculation. Frankly, some men should not be in the local ministry. However, when interviewed, the sincere vocational servant often felt compelled to leave because of conflict in the congregation and meeting fierce resistance to change in biblical matters. If they attempted to stay, the negative patterns of the congregation became apparent and more entrenched, primarily because of the next and final item.
- VII. The Church Rarely Prayed Together: My personal experience is that after reading numerous accounts, is that “Praying” degenerated and either became an “organ recital,” as just praying for aunt Lucy’s bunions, or praying with no passion and expectation of God’s answers. Churches that quit taking prayer seriously sooner or later eventually die. One of our great Polish/American missionaries by the name of Paul Bajko once said, “Much Prayer, Much Power, No Prayer No Power.” The testimony of many churches is that when they quit praying there seemed to be no hope and the church started dying. Beloved, prayer produces hope and hope creates vision and encourages love, supported by the membership submitting to every biblical principle of growth and Godliness.

**Conclusion:** Our restoration fathers called the church back to a model of prayer, biblical example and scripture in the Word. I believe we can again move our culture by keeping the simple examples simple. I am constantly being exposed to young Godly men and women who love their churches and the vital examples of Bible truth. There is no problem bigger than the Eternal God who created this world and sent His Son to redeem us and the teeming millions who need to hear the gospel of grace and power to change their lives and the world.

**Sources:** Harvey C. Bream Jr. with Dr. Keith J. Wise, *A Movement of Meaning and A Life Invested in It*. (Mason: CRA Publishing, 2008).

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