

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

(Restoring the Church to the New Testament Pattern)

by Gene McCoy

It was in Junior High School that I began to notice changes in my vision and first began wearing eyeglasses. Over the years, my vision gradually worsened, making stronger prescriptions necessary. When I was thirty-nine years old, the eye doctor told me to prepare for more drastic changes that would come more quickly as I approached middle age. He was right.

How is your vision? As many people look at a snapshot of church, they see a blurred picture. There is nothing wrong with their vision. The picture itself is distorted. Focusing on it gives many people a headache. Others, having looked at it, react negatively and refuse to have anything to do with it.

Just as my eye doctor prescribed corrective lenses for my failing eyes to restore clear vision, there is something we can do to correct the blurred and distorted picture we see in the religious world. Except the correction is not going to be to our eyes, but rather to the picture. Experts can take valuable paintings and other works of art that have deteriorated through the years and restore them to what they looked like originally. This is what we must continually do as it relates to the church.

Just as art restorers are not satisfied merely to touch up only the worst parts of a painting but rather to restore it to its original condition, so we should not be satisfied with anything less than returning the church to the original pattern, as described in the book of Acts.

When the apostles of Jesus established the church on the Day of Pentecost, there was no division like there is today -- no Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Catholics, etc. There was only one form of baptism – immersion of adults placing their faith in Jesus. There was one statement of faith – one creed – specifically, “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.”

Several years after the death of the last apostle, men began to depart from New Testament teaching, specifically as it pertained to the governing structure of the church. Using the government of Rome as the pattern instead of the Bible, one elder was elevated over others and ruled over numerous congregations instead of just one. And from those so promoted, one was selected to be chief over all, usurping the headship over the church that belongs to Jesus Christ alone.

Later, the baptism prescribed by Jesus and the apostles (immersion) was replaced by other forms that men considered to be just as effective and acceptable (sprinkling, pouring). Whereas only believing adults were baptized in the church established by the apostles, men began the practice of “infant baptism.”

What may have seemed at the time to be slight and insignificant departures from biblical teaching eventually resulted in a picture that was obviously a perversion of the original. Consider the illusion created by railroad tracks as an illustration of how *minute changes become massive* with the passage of time. On the horizon, railroad tracks appear to converge. Our eyes see the two lines

gradually separating further and further apart. Even a baby step away from the Bible will eventually result in major discrepancies, with the effect being the development of a picture that does not resemble the original. Departures that began gradually pick up momentum and accelerate over time. Reformers of the eighteenth century were disturbed by the departures of the Roman Catholic Church from the Bible. The reforms for which they contended were certainly needed. But what they did was similar to merely touching up some of the painting to make the picture somewhat more like the original. What was needed was *restoration, not merely reformation. What they should have done was to remove* all that didn't correspond to the original, not to merely *improve* (i.e., touch up) a distorted picture.

The reformers began with the distortion and tried to improve it. Restorers begin with the original and work to remove all that has caused the distortion. Perhaps you have seen programs on TV that show how an old house has been restored. It isn't merely a remodeling project, in which modern fixtures are used. No, restoration projects research the architecture and furnishings of the era and duplicate them right down to the glass doorknobs and wallpaper of the period.

Restoring old automobiles demands that the original color of paint be used and that the seats be covered with the same kind of material that was on them when the car was manufactured. Restoring something is to return it to its original form and design. Whether or not you do this with a house or a car will mean only the difference in its value on the market. But the church is radically different, because something more important than monetary value is at stake. The salvation of men's souls depends upon it! It must adhere to the divine blueprint and satisfy divine specifications.

Distressed by the division in their day, the nineteenth century restorers pleaded with people in the denominations to unite upon the simple proposition that the Bible is the sole authority to determine what should be taught and practiced, and that Jesus is the divine Son of God. Their plea must be renewed and resounded yet today to discard all denominational designations and distinctions and unite upon the foundation of the Bible alone; and to be known only as were the first converts – “Christians.”

The reformers were known as “Protestants.” They protested the perversions of the Roman Catholic Church. “Protestant” is derived from those who were opposed to certain parts of church teachings, resulting in the establishment of new denominations. The Restoration Movement is not about breaking with any particular group in protest or as an attempt to “reform.” Reforming a particular denomination and establishing another denomination is not the goal of restorers. The goal is to go back to the original pattern and picture, as described in the New Testament. The restorers wanted to be known, not as Catholics or Protestants, but rather as Christians. Restorers are not “protestants” or even “non-denominational.” They are “pre-denominational.” They insist upon going back to the beginning, before there was the division of denominations.

The restorers were not interested in establishing a new denomination, which would only add to the division among God's people. What they began and what we continue is not a denomination, but a movement. There are no denominational trappings (earthly headquarters, hierarchy, distinctive names, human creeds, etc.). Instead, it is a free fellowship among like-minded individuals and congregations that are bound together, not by human organization but as a divine organism; by a common conviction that the Bible is the sole authority in matters pertaining to salvation.

This free fellowship is characterized by principles that drive this movement:

- The Bible only produces Christians only
- We are Christians only but not the only Christians.
- Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where it is silent, we are silent.
- Call Bible things by Bible names.
- No creed but Christ; No book but the Bible; No name but the Divine
- In Faith Unity, in Opinions Liberty, and in All Things Love

How can you tell if you are in a restored congregation? There are various characteristics that mark a restored church. These restoration practices include:

- No denominational designation – non-hyphenated Christians
- Weekly observance of the Lord's Supper
- Baptism of adults by immersion for the purposes of washing sin away
- No distinctive title for preachers (e.g., Pastor, Reverend, Father, Brother, etc.)
- No "clergy" / "laity" distinction – Every Christian is a priest
- No vestments or special garb (e.g., robes)
- No extra-congregational organization (hierarchy, delegate convention, etc.)

There is one sure way you can know you are in a restored congregation. When the appeal is made to respond to the Gospel invitation in a restored congregation, you will hear the very same words that were spoken by the apostles on the Day of Pentecost when they were asked what must be done in order to be saved from their sin. The answer that must be restored is this:

"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

These words are ignored, disregarded, or not seen by those in churches that have been merely reformed. The picture they paint is still fraught with the impurities of human creeds, dogmas and tradition. The problem is not with the original, but with the eyes of those viewing it. Many religious groups simply do not want to see this picture that is in clear focus in the Word of God. They persist in and insist upon teachings men have devised in response to the question of what one must do to be saved. They tell people to pray a prayer or to invite Jesus into their heart, despite the fact that God never gave such instruction. People who have responded to this teaching have displayed faith in man, not faith in God. They have done what man told them to do but have not done what God told them to do. Consequently, they are still lost in the guilt of their sin.

A woman discovered that the reason she was not seeing clearly was the fact that the prescription in her eyeglasses did not match what the doctor had prescribed. For over a year she wore eyeglasses that did not correspond to the prescription. She was sincere enough. And she was diligent and faithful to wear the glasses every day. They did assist her vision, but she was not seeing clearly. She didn't hesitate in getting the correct lenses once she discovered the discrepancy, for she wanted to bring vision into line with the standard.

I call upon you to align yourself to/with the biblical teaching relating to salvation and the church. If you have followed the teaching of men in a denominational religious group and have not been immersed into Jesus for the purpose of obtaining the forgiveness of sin, this is your opportunity to do so. As Paul says in Romans 6, be united with Christ by participating in His death, burial and resurrection as you are buried in the water of baptism and raised in the likeness of Jesus' resurrection to inherit life everlasting.

If you have separated yourself from other followers of Jesus by wearing a denominational designation, this is your opportunity to celebrate unity by discarding that divisive name and to wear the designation by which the earliest followers of Jesus wore – “Christian.” Stop being a “hyphenated Christian.”

“God reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their sins against them, and he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making His appeal through us; we beg you – we implore you – on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God.” 2 Corinthians 5:19-20