

**Valley
Church of Christ**

**The Restoration plea of the
churches of Christ**

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Worshipping God...

Serving Others...

One man's words, spoken 2000 years ago, sparked a revolution that today is the most powerful force on the planet:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit..." (Matthew 28: 19) ...Jesus Christ, Savior & Son of God (New American Standard Bible)

This simple declarative statement remains the most powerful words ever spoken by man. Within approximately 50 days of the great commission, Peter – an Apostle of Christ and one of the leaders of His disciples – preached what is believed to be the first major sermon of the one true church. (Acts 2: 14-47)

Now here we are 20 centuries from the time Christ established His church and we find ourselves in a divided religious world where most people are confused about who, where and how they should worship. There are too many voices delivering too many different messages. This document is intended to help us all rediscover the message of Christ and help restore the Christian principles that led to the phenomenal growth of Christ's church throughout the world.

With so many different denominations or religious groups worldwide – each with its own views and doctrines – it is not easy to find the truth. Our Lord never intended it that way. His message is simple: *"One Lord, one faith, one baptism."* (Ephesians 4:5).

Even the great founders and spiritual leaders of current denominational institutions echoed this message. Consider the words of these famous ministers:

"I ask that men make no reference to my name, and call themselves not Lutherans, but Christians. What is Luther? My doctrine, I am sure, is not mine, nor have I been crucified for any one. St. Paul, in I Cor. 3 would not allow Christians to call themselves Pauline or Petrine, but Christian. How then should I, poor, foul carcass that I am, come to have children of Christ a name derived from my worthless name? No, no my dear friends; let us abolish all party names, and call ourselves Christians after Him whose doctrine we have." (Hugh Thomas Kerr, *A Compend of Luther's Theology*).

"I look forward with pleasure to the day when there will not be a Baptist living! I hope the Baptist name will soon perish, but let Christ's name last forever" ...Charles Spurgeon, a prominent Baptist preacher (Spurgeon Memorial Library Vol. 1 Page 168)

"Would to God that all party names, and unscriptural phrases and forms which have divided the Christian world, were forgot and that the very name (Methodist) might never be mentioned more, but be buried in eternal oblivion." (John Wesley, *A Dictionary of Arts, Science, History, Biography, Law, Literature, Religions. Vol 9, page 540*)

We are called to be a part of the Church that carries on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ until he returns. Non-denominational Christianity requires that today's church strive to imitate the Lord's body as it appeared in the mind of God and as it appears in the New Testament.

Achieving that means holding on to certain premises practiced by first century Christians, as well as the fellowship of churches of Christ TODAY. In the interest of brevity, we will discuss two of those premises.

First, we believe that the church was established 2,000 years ago on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). The church is perfect in its plan and in its design. And it was intended to be the model for all subsequent ages, in all matters of faith and practice. Now we do not have to model the customs of the

day or social traditions of the first century. But it is a model of faith and practice. Second, the New Testament Scriptures, as they reveal the church, are a pattern or a blueprint for us to follow.

As discussed earlier, since the first century there have been many departures from the New Testament pattern of the church. Therefore, there is a continual need for the restoration of the church. The major reason for a continual restoration is that mankind has a history of departing from God. Consider Jeremiah 6:16.

"This is what the LORD says: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'"

As one reads the history of Old Testament Israel, you will see time and time again that they would walk with God for a while then they would drift away.

Another illustration of this would be during the time of King Josiah. He became the King of Israel when he was just a boy, only 8 years old. When he was a young man he began to make real progress in driving idolatry from the land. When he was 26 he had the people clean out the temple of God in Jerusalem. And while they were cleaning out the temple they found the Law of Moses. And he had the people assemble and the law of God was read. And they wept and restored some things that had been neglected for a very long time. Note II Kings 22:8-13; II Kings 23:1-3.

The same cycle existed during Jesus' earthly ministry. In John 17:20,21 Jesus expressed a strong emphasis on unity and not being divided.

²⁰ *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,*
²¹ *that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*

But it has been difficult for followers of Jesus to respect that prayer. Even among the 12 apostles of Jesus there was disharmony at times, look at Mark 9:33-35.

³³ *They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"* ³⁴ *But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.* ³⁵ *Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all."*

And then in I Corinthians 1:10-12 we read that early churches struggled with keeping unity with one another.

¹⁰ *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.* ¹¹ *My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.* ¹² *What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas "; still another, "I follow Christ."*

These are just a few examples of the human tendency to let things slip away, and our loyalty to God's truth decline. Only one church existed in the first century of Christianity. That one church was the one that Jesus said that he built in Matthew 16:18. It is the same one that the apostle Paul described as the body of Christ in Ephesians 1:22,23. Therefore, the church in the New Testament was not Catholic or Protestant. It was simply the church that belonged to Christ.

There is a story told of an elderly couple who had some bronze baby shoes built into bookends. An

antique collector heard about the bookends and wanted to buy them. And he offered them \$100 dollars and the elderly couple smiled. And they said, "no they are not for sale". And the collector pushed it and said, "\$500 dollars". And then, "\$1000 dollars" all the way to "\$10,000 dollars". And finally he said, "I would be interested why in your old age and at a time when you could really use the money, why you are not willing to sell those shoes?" And the couple said back to him. "You do not understand – those shoes belonged to our child who died when he was just a baby. So they are not for sale at any price." Ownership makes a difference and the New Testament says that the church belongs to Christ.

However, it was prophesied that there would be a falling away – caused by people wanting to serve themselves rather than Christ. Acts 20:28-30

²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

& II Timothy 4:1-4.

^{4:1} In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

Let's consider some of the departures from the New Testament pattern, since the first century, that can be discovered in church history.

One was the gradual development of a system of rulers into a hierarchy, patterned after the political organization of the Roman Empire. The New Testament teaches that there is to be a plurality of Bishops (elders – shepherds) over one congregation. Read Philippians 1:1; Acts 20:17. And you will see there was not one Bishop over one church. This change in the polity of the church gradually developed into the papacy.

Another was the formulation and enforcing of uninspired church decrees. For example, praying to saints, infant baptism, praying to Mary, instrumental music, and the compulsory celibacy for church leaders, the doctrine of the infallibility of the Pope, and the doctrine of purgatory. This is not an exhaustive list but just some of the departures.

In the first century after the resurrection of Jesus the early church conquered the heathen world. But after that the heathen world conquered to an extent the church by allowing human traditions to creep in.

However, back in 1500's, there were some men who began calling for reform, like Martin Luther and John Calvin. And these men helped to correct many of the abuses and departures from the New Testament pattern.

These men did reform the church but did not restore the church to its original pattern. And the Protestant reformation developed its own set of problems and divisions. Practically every group has invented some organizational structure which suits the purposes of men, but which largely ignores the simple serving organization of the New Testament church. As is so often the case with civil government, high offices in religion tend to be self serving, wasteful and abusive. For example, local members lose control of funds and property. Even doctrinal positions may be forced upon churches, without regard to what members find in the Scriptures. A current example of this is that some

denominational leaders are trying to force the acceptance of gay and lesbian members & ministers.

As a result - today there are several hundred different protestant churches. Divisions have not resulted from God's word, but from man's misapplication of it. We believe the only way to achieve unity is by a return to the Bible. Hence, back in the 1700-1800's people in several different places in the world began what some church historians have called the restoration movement. The attempt of these leaders was not to establish another denomination but to simply be Christians nothing more and nothing less.

These people are not as well known but still made their marks of revival during their ministries. In North Carolina and Virginia there was a man by the name of James O' Kelly. Up in New England, two men stand out - Abner Jones and Elias Smith. In Ohio there was Walter Scott, in Kentucky a man by the name of Barton W. Stone, and then in Pennsylvania and West Virginia – Thomas and Alexander Campbell.

These men like others saw the vast changes from the original New Testament pattern. And their cry was to go back to the Bible as the final authority for worship and practice.

What do we need? We need to take God's inspired word and follow it and not the traditions of men. Because most religious differences are due to the acceptance of practices not found in the Bible.

We need to find out what the New Testament says about conversion and follow it. For example, infant baptism is not taught in the New Testament, but rather, before a person is baptized they must come to a personal need and faith in Jesus Christ, like Jesus stated in Mark 16:16. Even John Calvin the founder of the Presbyterian Church came to this biblical conclusion.

"As Christ enjoins them to teach before baptizing, and desires that none but believers shall be admitted to baptism, it would appear that baptism is not properly administered unless when preceded by faith." (Harmony of the Evangelists, Vol. 3. Page 38).

And what it says about worship and follow it. Some churches worship today is based more upon the material splendor of the Old Testament temple. But when Jesus died - his cross took the place of the altar and the priesthood changed, and the ceremonies changed. And now the New Testament teaches that all Christians are priests and to individually offer up spiritual sacrifices to God. (I Peter 2:5,9; Romans 12:1; Revelation 1:6). Of course, we all have different roles and the bible defines what our roles should be, but every child of God has a priestly function to perform. In the words of the Scottish preacher John Caird (1820-1898), *"Live for Christ in common things and all your work will be priestly work."*

Ephesians 4:15,16 emphasizes that every member has his or her work to do, and by this harmonious working together the body of Christ will grow.

¹⁵ *Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.* ¹⁶ *From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

To restore New Testament Christianity we must resist the trend of individualism and isolationism, and celebrate a sense of belonging to one another in Christ's body. First century believers were together frequently to praise God and edify one another. And we should restore how the church was governed and organized and stay with it. Churches of Christ do not have the trappings of modern day bureaucracy. There are no regional or national headquarters. Therefore, we do not submit to the Pope, or to the patriarch of Constantinople, or to the archbishop of Canterbury or to the Missouri synod. Each congregation is autonomous (self-ruled). However, congregations do cooperate in sending out

missionaries and in various types of benevolent needs domestically and overseas. We need to restore local church autonomy and the bible system that each church must answer for itself. This is made clear in the letters to the seven churches addressed in Revelation, chapters 2 and 3 where each one would stand or fall on the basis of its own actions. A self-governing church can remain faithful even if all other churches should apostatize.

We must make sure that we restore Christian morals and concern for others. God wants us to internalize and live the values of heaven. The church of any age must not let the world set the agenda for morality.

We must also restore the need for reaching out to lost souls and the urgency of taking the gospel to the whole world (Matthew 28:18-20). Restoration is the never-ending struggle to capture the essence of the religion of Christ.

The early church was an excited church. Let's get a first hand look at this in Acts 2:42-47.

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Notice some key words in this text. They were devoted, filled with awe, and they were together. They ate together, assembled together, and prayed together. Their concern for the Lord and his people was greater than their concerns for material goods.

We need to work at restoring the simplicity of New Testament worship. We should not impoverish worship to God by hindering it with human tradition (Mark 7:7-9). Various human traditions have been added to worship since the first century. For example, the veneration of images, prayers to Mary, instrumental music, etc - none of these traditions can be found in the worship of the New Testament. If these things cannot be found in the New Testament we believe it is safe and right to leave them out, too. Conversely, you do find that as the early Christians assembled together on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7 and I Corinthians 16:1,2; Acts 2:42), that they would sing, pray, study the Scriptures, take up material collections for benevolence and other needs, and they would take communion to remember what Christ had done for them. And we know from such respected church historians as Neander and Eusebius that the early Christians would take this memorial supper every Sunday. And Christians are to continue to do this until the Lord returns (I Corinthians 11:23-26).

The church is a community of believers, not an anonymous group of worshipers. People need to belong and be accepted. New Testament Christianity is a group of people banded together to worship God and serve one another. We are not Catholic or Protestant but simply members of the church for which he died.

If this plea sounds good to you we would encourage you to become a part of this movement. The key is to look back into the owner's manual (the Bible) and rediscover the church.

Written by Jim Crisp