

Origin of the Restoration Movement

by F.W. Burnham

The Restoration Movement originated from the great essential truths emerging from the heat of the Protestant Reformation, including liberty, the right of private judgment, and the authority of the untrammelled Word.

Scripture: Psalm 119:105, John 17:21, Acts 17:11, Romans 14:1, 1 Corinthians 1:10, Galatians 5:1, Ephesians 4:3, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12, 1 Peter 2:2

Topics: "Church History", "Restoration Movement"

Description

F.W. Burnham preaches about the origins of the Restoration movement, tracing it back to fundamental Protestant principles like liberty, the right of private judgment, and the authority of the untrammelled Word. He emphasizes the importance of the movement's goal to unite all Christians by restoring New Testament Christianity, highlighting the significant events and individuals that led to its formation, such as Thomas Campbell's 'Declaration and Address' in 1809 and the influence of Covenant Theology and Lockean philosophy. Burnham underscores the movement's roots in the Protestant Reformation and the intellectual awakening of the Renaissance, which sparked a renewed interest in the Bible and the right of individuals to interpret it for themselves.

Transcript

Sixth United Presbyterian Church, Saturday Morning, October 14.

"There are certain moments and scenes," says A. M. Fairbairn, "which profoundly touch the imagination. Abraham, his back to Chaldea, his face to Canaan, setting out, with his young and beautiful Sarah, from the cradle of the great world-empires, to seek a land where he could find an empire of the Spirit; the [336] first rude settlers, building their huts on the hills beside the Tiber, tending their flocks, praying to their gods, spoiling their enemies, laying--in the blind and unconscious way common to men, doing greater things than they dream of--the foundations of a city whose dominion was to be for centuries coextensive with civilization; Columbus leaving Europe or standing on the deck of his ship watching the new world, with all its boundless hope and promise to the old, rising from below the horizon;" the coming together of that group of early colonists, in the new world into a Continental Congress, whence issues a Declaration of Independence which thrills the world, and sets in the heavens a new star of hope for all humanity--"these are scenes which mark so great moments in the life of man that the imagination is equally awed and inspired in their presence."

Another such event to stir the imagination is that of Sept. 7, 1809, when Thomas Campbell, together with a little group of devout fellow-Christians, by issuing in the spirit of brotherly love, to all the divided bodies of Christian believers, a "Declaration and Address," set going this movement, small and weak in its beginnings, but mighty in its accumulating results, which should have for its single purpose the union of all the followers of Jesus, in order that his prayer for unity might be answered, and the whole world be brought to him.

The momentous importance of such events is seldom realized at the time of their occurrence--ships pass in the night. Years afterward we discover their true significance. One hundred years after the writing of the "Declaration and Address," we come to celebrate its centennial anniversary. A personal friend, Judge Charles P. Kane, has hit upon the rightful designation when he says of this celebration, "It is the ceremony of unveiling the gift of a century to God."

My mission is the tracing of the sources. While it may be true that the Restoration movement had its birth in the Brush Run Church, in the "Declaration and Address," or in the death-throes and birth-pains of the Springfield Presbytery; yet if we would know the original life-giving elements which produced that birth, we must go back of the record of Brush Run or Cane Ridge, back of all our so-called "Historical Documents," back to that formative period when first the eruptive forces of Christian truth and the Spirit burst forth in the great Protestant Reformation, and discover there, and in its antecedents, those principles--centrifugal and centripetal--which are destined yet to produce liberty and unify in the kingdom of God on earth.

Leading up to the Protestant Reformation, as one of its efficient causes,

F. W. BURNHAM.

was the great intellectual awakening of the Renaissance. This revival of learning sent the students of science, philosophy and religion alike, to a resurvey of their respective fields of thought and investigation. Many men were driven to seek anew the original sources of truth. The Bible, long chained by ecclesiastical interpretation and Papal authority, was wrenched loose from its rusty fetters, eagerly opened and earnestly investigated. It became a new book in a new age. It invited and inspired further research. The spirit it breathed fanned the enkindled fires of life and liberty, until the flames were ready to burst forth. No sooner had a tongue of light appeared than it flashed from hill to hill until a continent was lighted. In the blaze of this new light, like genii when Aladdin's lamp was rubbed, giant leaders appeared, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and Melancthon, each taking his bold stand upon independent research of Holy Scripture.

Out of this awakened attention to the content of Scripture, and this released spirit of liberty, arose two principles which were of vital import to the Reformation, and which, having modified the whole trend of Protestant Christianity, became generative factors of this Restoration movement. Of these two principles the first is the right of private judgment; that is, the right of [337] every man to read the Bible for himself, and to form his own judgment as to its meaning and application; a right which, according to the true Protestant idea, each man is not only privileged to enjoy, but is normally bound to exercise. This principle is fundamental to Protestantism. The logical and necessary implication of this principle is that the Holy Scriptures are able of themselves, unaided and unsupported by any authoritative human interpretation, formulation or creedal statement whatsoever, to make their own highest and divinest appeal to the individual heart and conscience. Whenever, therefore, any religious body demands adherence to a formulation of belief other than the word of God, it violates this right of private judgment.

The second generative principle is the essential oneness--and the practical possibility of organic union, through the Spirit--of all those who, guided by this untrammelled Word, yield loyal obedience to our one Lord and Master Jesus Christ. This second principle was inherent in the Reformation, and mostly latent in the development of Protestantism; but it became the active and most potent factor in the rise of this Restoration movement.

Though the limits of this address will not permit a detailed tracing of all those links which connect this movement with its remote sources, there are two which should not be omitted. One was a branch of theology, the other a system of philosophy.

The first was the Covenant Theology which arose in the Netherlands, in the seventeenth century, under the clear presentation of one Coccejus, who was a pupil of the English Puritan, William Ames. This Covenant Theology appeared in Scotland in 1718, by the republication of a book, "The Marrow of Modern Divinity," which had been written eighty years before by Edward Fisher, an adherent of Cromwell's. Thomas Boston was familiar with this work, as he was also with the writings of Witsius, who was a disciple of Coccejus himself. Through the influence of Thomas Boston the Covenant Theology was given wide currency among the churches of Scotland after the Secession. As a member of the Seceder branch of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, Alexander Campbell came under the influence of this theology while yet in his youth. It doubtless gave him the key to the progressive revelation of the Scriptures, marked by covenants, which he used so sanely and effectively in his great pioneer work of the Restoration. By it he led the way for the common people into an intelligent understanding of the Bible, its plan of salvation, and the requirements of the Christian life. The influence of this contribution to Scripture interpretation has permeated all our modern Bible teaching, and has become a precursor of the historical method of Biblical research.

The second important link is the philosophical system of Locke, by which Mr. Campbell was profoundly influenced. This system, with its appeal to fact, its theory of knowledge as the result of sensation, its well-defined limitations of the mind, formed the basis of all the philosophical thinking of our fathers. It conditioned their conceptions of faith, knowledge, experience, and of the possibility and the method of divine revelation. However, this was not peculiar to them. The philosophy of Locke cast the die of thought for the English-speaking peoples at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Professor Van Kirk has probably not stated the case too strongly when he says that the Covenant Theology and the Lockean philosophy formed the intellectual preparation of the world for the current Restoration movement.

And now, to note the visible channels through which these vital forces of Protestantism have manifested themselves in the rise of the Restoration movement--as one might trace the course of melting snows from their lodges amid the eternal peaks, down through plunging cataracts and swirling torrents, out to swell the tide of mighty rivers which bear on toward the sea--is but to follow the well-explored canons of comparatively modern religious history.

In Volume V. of the Christian Baptist there is a series of letters setting forth the faith and order of several churches in America, England and Scotland. These letters were called out by a circular issued by a church of [338] Christ in New York, in the year 1818, which church, endeavoring to build upon thoroughly Scriptural and catholic ground itself, desired to share the fellowship of other such churches everywhere, and to learn from them, if possible, the way of the Lord more perfectly. The responses to their overtures, received by this New York church, were afterward published in a volume, and in Mr. Campbell's review of that volume we have some of them preserved. They are instructive as showing the organic inceptions of

this movement.

From the response received from the church of Christ meeting in Morrison's Court, Glasgow, we learn that such beginnings date back somewhat into the eighteenth century. "Such churches as ours," says the Glasgow correspondent, "have existed in Scotland, and Edinburgh and Glasgow, from thirty to forty years." This carries us back to possibly 1778. The response from the church of Christ assembling in Leith Walk, Edinburgh, July, 1818, says, "It is about twenty years since we were first associated together." The reply from Tubermore, Ireland, states that that church was organized in 1807. The churches at Manchester and Dublin arose in 1810. The letters show that these churches were mainly of independent origin. In the early days they had little fellowship with one another. Messengers sometimes passed from one to another; but there was no associational relation. The simple fact of each trying to build upon the original New Testament foundation resulted in their being of substantial agreement, so that, when Mr. Campbell visited them in 1848 by invitation, and as the representative of similar congregations in America, he was, for the most part, cordially received by them and his visit resulted in bringing them into closer fellowship with each other and with the whole Restoration movement.

Some of these churches can still be identified as living members of the movement. The New York church was the present West Fifty-sixth Street Church of the Disciples. "The Glasgow church was probably of Scotch Baptist origin. It antedates the Haldanes. In fellowship with this church were those at Paisley, Perth, London, Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham and others. The Edinburgh church was the congregation of J. A. Haldane, the remains of the old Independent, Circus congregation which had moved to Leith Walk. The Tubermore (Ireland) church was the congregation of Alexander Carson."

Through the emigrants whom they sent to this country, either of their own members or of others who had been impressed by the principles for which they stood, these Independent churches of England, Scotland and Ireland were the authors of like congregations in America, and forerunners of the Restoration. The New York church was probably thus founded by these Independent Scotch-Baptist immigrants. Howbeit, the springs of liberty which there were choked here flowed freely. Whatever seed of freedom there seemed swelling with new life, here, planted in the virgin soil of a new world, readily took root and flourished. Accordingly, the old theological divisions and ecclesiastical restraints which authorities across the sea sought to establish here, could hardly retain their foreign rigidity, soon "waxed old and were nigh to vanishing away," while the principles of liberty and union grew rapidly.

The organic evolution of the Restoration movement in America came through several independent sources, chief of which, and practically the only ones of historic significance, were as follows: First, the aforementioned New York "Church of Christ," whose members and sister congregations adopted the name of Disciples of Christ. Second, that large movement originating in the Springfield Presbytery of Kentucky, under the able leadership of Barton W. Stone, in the year 1804, and having a splendid growth through a quarter of a century of independent existence. And third, the distinctively union movement, which came finally to embrace all the others, beginning with the issuance of the "Declaration and Address" by Thomas Campbell in 1809; taking its first outward form in the Brush Run Church of the Washington Association, then identifying itself with the Baptist Church; for twenty years wearing the name of Reforming Baptists; and finally issuing, after the mutual drawing together of the several bodies under the [339] masterful advocacy and resourceful leadership of Alexander Campbell, as a great brotherhood of Disciples of Christ, or independent associations of churches of Christ, set for the union of all Christians by the restoration of New Testament Christianity. Call it what you will--"A Restoration Movement," "The Christian Church," "A Brotherhood," "A Denomination"--here was an inspiration, a manifestation of divine

mercy, having its springs in the fundamental principles of Protestantism, its ultimate source in the quickened word of God, carrying those principles to their last analysis and giving to the enfranchised souls of men a liberty unknown before save as prophet-souls and seers had caught visions thereof from the sacred Word.

"For freedom did Christ set us free; stand fast, therefore, and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage."

Here, then, we have the origin of the Restoration movement; not directly in the social or religious conditions immediately preceding its visible organization, nor in the uncertain life of antecedent congregations, nor yet in systems of theology or philosophy, important as these were as modifying factors, but in those great essential truths emerging from the heat of the Protestant Reformation, like pure gold from the refiner's fire, mighty fundamental principles, slow maturing through half a thousand years--liberty, the right of private judgment, the authority of the untrammelled Word, the essential oneness of believers by very right of their free approach to one common Lord. Given these principles operative in the life of a free people, and it is inevitable that sometime, somewhere, such a movement as this should come to birth. Its growth depends upon its advocates.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/fw-burnham/origin-of-the-restoration-movement/>

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